

## The ESL Language Barrier: The Written Word vs. the Spoken Word

Jessica Abdelnour

In her article, Abdelnour explores and reveals the challenges that ESL people face when learning English. She compares reading, writing, and speaking in English through a unique cultural lens.

As I began my task of writing a *Grassroots Writing Research Journal* article, I asked myself the same daunting question over and over again: Where should I start? I knew what I wanted to write about as soon as I heard the assignment because of a recent personal experience that happened to me, although I was unsure how to make all my ideas flow together. Specifically, I wanted to discuss the language barrier that my dad faces, especially with written English. Here is the story of my dad and his journey throughout the English language.

The intention of this article is to raise awareness and respect for ESL (English as a Second Language) people, and the focus is centered around the language barrier that these folks face on a daily basis. While researching, I focused on my dad's writing research identity as an ESL writer. **Writing research identity** refers to how a writer identifies or feels about communicating. Everyone approaches writing and communicating in a different way, which allows us to analyze writing research identities on an individual and unique level based on our different experiences with learning. The knowledge and skills that make up my dad's writing research

identity are very unique and interesting. His first language is Arabic, and he writes, speaks, and reads Arabic every day. My dad's second language is French, which was taught to him by his mom as a child. He did not have any problems taking down the language barriers of Spanish and Italian when his friends and cooks at his restaurant started teaching him through communication because of how similar French, Spanish, and Italian are. He knows five languages, which is pretty badass, if you ask me!

While my dad was able to learn all these languages, he struggled a little in particular areas like writing in English, reading in Spanish, writing in Italian, etc. This made me realize that there is so much more to his writing research identity than what I had originally thought. To better examine and understand his writing research identity, I used Illinois State University's (ISU's) version of **cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)**, which is a tool that aids in understanding and analyzing any genre that we encounter in the world and centers around all aspects that make up the elements of textual production. Using some of the ISU CHAT terms I learned in English 101 was the easiest way for me to break down the complexity of my dad's writing research identity.

My dad is straight from Egypt. He came here when he was twenty years old with twenty dollars in his pocket and zero knowledge of the English language. As the years went on, he built his restaurant business and taught himself how to speak, read, and write in English. Learning English is not an easy task, and the fact that my dad did it without taking any lessons or classes is remarkable. This tells me a lot about his writing research identity, in that he was able to learn four or five languages through the spoken word. He is most comfortable with learning through full immersion in the society and through speaking back and forth with family and friends. Because of this, his writing research identity formed in somewhat of an unconventional way since he learned the languages that came his way through the people that he met.

At the same time, my dad did not practice writing as much as he practiced speaking, which created a wide gap between his skill levels. This gap is also a part of his writing research identity since a successful writer can adapt and determine when new skills and knowledge are required. For my dad, learning each of these languages on the fly gave him a competitive edge and well-rounded persona in the restaurant industry, but he still had some obstacles to overcome. A more current struggle that he is facing has to do with his language barrier with the written English word. The ISU CHAT terms socialization, distribution, and ecology can help us consider his narrative because they helped me break down the elements of his language barriers.

## CHAT Connections

When my dad first came to America, he knew exactly what he wanted to do: cook. He is an amazing and talented chef and can cook up anything—from authentic Mexican food to sophisticated Italian cuisine. He opened his first restaurant in 1998 and called it “Fantastico Italian Cuisine,” which he owned and managed for nineteen years and was extremely successful. To manage and own a restaurant, by law, you must obtain a food certificate license. During the late 1990s, a food certification management license was very attainable for someone who went to culinary school and who identified as ESL. The test started with a small room of about twenty to thirty people who were able to socialize and talk through the test and questions. The teacher would explain the test out loud and break down how it would proceed. Since the teacher and the other test takers in the room could help each other out through verbal communication, my dad did not struggle. This made me think of the CHAT term **socialization**: how interactions between people and institutions can affect the way a text is digested, produced, and understood.

For ESL people, socialization is a huge factor that impacts language performance because these individuals might lack proficiency in writing, spelling, and reading skills while conversely excelling in speaking and listening. For instance, my dad passed the test for nineteen years without any language barrier issues because he was able to talk aloud, ask colleagues when he didn’t understand a question or a word, and have a collaborative effort at the test. This is not to be mistaken with lack of content knowledge because he was a highly trained professional chef who knew the regulations and responsibilities of maintaining a restaurant like the back of his hand. What was really happening was that the way he learned English shaped his writing research identity and his skill level in a way that worked in this particular testing environment.

In 2012, my dad’s restaurant went out of business, but he quickly reignited his passion and opened up a taco truck in 2016 called “Fantastico Grill” that serves authentic Mexican food. My dad needed to renew his license for the taco truck before 2019. Unfortunately, they are now requiring a written and timed test in order to obtain a food management license. This is obviously a huge problem for my dad, considering that he struggles with written English and has relied heavily on the collaborative environment in which he took the previous tests. At first, when he told me about this, I was stunned. I was nervous for him, and I did everything I could do to help him be prepared for reading English at a consistent pace. My sister and I studied with him by reading some sample test questions aloud to him. He knew every

answer right away, usually even before my sister and I could finish reading the question. This was no surprise to us, considering he has been a chef for more than twenty years. He was very confident in himself and knew the information, but he was very uncomfortable with the idea of a time limit in a silent room.

On the day of my dad's test, I called him and wished him good luck. He told me he would call me afterward and let me know how it went. When I got the call, his voice dropped as he told me that he failed. I was livid. I knew that he knew every answer to every question. My heart sank because I could feel the devastation in his voice because not only did he fail, but he also had to retake the test for a fifty-dollar fee. He and I were furious at the government (typical), and I told him that I would try to see if I could arrange accommodations for him next time around.

The language barrier that my dad experienced during this test reminded me of the CHAT term **distribution**, the means through which a text is produced and distributed. When my dad took the test before, he was able to socialize and use his teacher and test mates as resources because of how the test was distributed. He got an in-depth introduction to the test through the instructor, and he was able to talk aloud with people in the room and ask questions as needed. The individual distribution of the second test was very hindering to my dad because he did not learn English through this type of composition: a formal, timed, multiple-choice test. The written word in the isolated distribution of this test highly affected his performance, especially since he was unfamiliar with a lot of the advanced English vocabulary. Ultimately, the test's distribution determined my dad's success or failure in this circumstance. He told me that he struggled most with the way the questions were worded and the time limit. Knowing how standardized tests are, I knew exactly what he meant. They use complicated and unnatural wording to make the questions harder. As well, the test had a time limit of ninety minutes but had eighty questions. He told me that by the time he got to question fifty, it was already at the one hour and fifteen-minute mark, so he rushed to try and finish the rest of the questions. The complicated language of the test questions resulted in him rereading the questions over and over again, just to make sure he was understanding each one correctly. This obviously took up a lot more time because he worried that he might've gotten stuck on one or two words that he was not familiar with and got confused. The distribution of the test in an isolated manner was the problem, given that his writing research identity favors socialization.

The reason my dad was able to learn so many languages is because he was constantly challenging himself to do so in these environments. He was

grateful to have learned French at a young age from his mother because, when he came to America and made Italian and Spanish friends, he quickly picked up those other languages. He met these friends through talking to people on the streets as well as at the restaurants he worked at before having his own restaurant. The same goes for learning English: he would listen to people and observe how they spoke and addressed each other in various public settings. He eventually picked up on the language and immersed himself further into English by reading more and opening up to popular culture through music or the radio. The setting or environment that my dad learned English in was very different from the way he was tested. His learning depended on socialization since he listened to people talk on the streets, in the grocery store, at the casinos, etc. In fact, my dad's use of the environment around him and how it was involved in his language learning process reminded me of the ISU CHAT term **ecology**: the physical or biological forces that exist beyond the boundaries of a text's production. My dad was familiar with a verbal English rather than a textual or written English, and his English expertise and vocabulary were entirely shaped by the physical environment in which he learned those languages. The ecology of the second test in a silent classroom without social interactions produced a very uncomfortable environment that my dad was unfamiliar with. He had never taken the food management test in this type of setting, and it made him nervous to be surrounded by silence. Basically, the second test was at odds with my dad's writing research identity.

### Research (Content vs. Primary)

Let me just say: my dad is in his late fifties and does not know how to use technology, let alone research written English all over the Internet. The most he can do is scroll through his Facebook that he tries desperately to spell words correctly on . . . LOL. I did extensive **content research**, gaining knowledge or information about how to produce or shape a text, when thinking about this test, and I looked up the possibility of a test accommodation for my dad to ease the pressures that hindered him in the first test. I found a link to a test accommodation form after multiple phone calls back and forth with the test management center. I filled it out for him and checked the box that allowed for him to receive a reader. Given what I knew about my dad's writing research identity, I knew a reader would help him do better on the test. However, he didn't like the idea of it because he didn't want to admit that he needed help from anyone, especially when it came to his food management and safety skills. He originally wanted to bring my little sister with him to read the questions aloud, but the test center insisted on paying a twenty-dollar fee

to hire a reader. My dad's stubbornness and reluctance were also a part of his writing research identity because they shaped his ability to succeed in this writing situation. But I understood his frustration. I was so mad at the way the entire institutionalized test was structured. Someone who has owned and managed a restaurant on his own for twenty-plus years certainly knows all the sanitation and food rules, yet my dad's language barrier was hindering his restaurant business.

I wanted to find out more about all of this, so I figured that the best way to find out how my dad identifies when communicating in English would be to ask him some questions about his experience with the English language. I conducted **primary research**, research you conduct on your own, by asking my dad specific questions about his journey throughout the English language and what types of barriers he has faced during his learning experience in America. This type of research was most beneficial and effective for me, personally, but, in other situations, content research might be more helpful. Here's how my informal interview with my dad went:

**Q:** How would you describe your writing abilities in English?

**A:** I would say they are OK. I think that I have improved a lot since I first came here, but I also have a lot of room for improvements.

**Q:** What are your weakest areas in writing?

**A:** I struggle the most with spelling.

**Q:** What is harder, writing English or reading English? Why?

**A:** Writing is harder for me because I struggle with spelling and choosing the correct grammar/words. Reading English is easier because I can use the other words around the word that I am unsure of and still understand the sentence.

**Q:** When you don't know how to spell a word, what do you do?

**A:** Whenever I fail at anything, I try and try again. Usually people correct me right away if I spell a word wrong. If it's for something professional, I will look it up online or ask you or your sister.

**Q:** I know you love to comment on my pictures and statuses on Facebook. Do you ever get self-conscious of the way you write English although you try your best?

**A:** No, I am never ashamed to make mistakes or to be corrected. I think it's all a part of learning and growing. I will never be embarrassed because then I will never get better.

**Q:** Who has helped your writing grow over the years?

**A:** I am the one who has helped myself the most. I did most of it on my own, reading to practice and talking with friends to get better at it. I kept trying every day to get better and better, and if it wasn't for my hard work and ambition to learn, I wouldn't have. You, your sister, and your mom also taught me a lot about English.

**Q:** What is the best resource for you when it comes to writing and reading?

**A:** The Internet or you and your sister.

**Q:** What was the hardest part about the test you took for food management?

**A:** I have never taken a timed test like this before, so I was unsure and uncomfortable. There was not enough time, the questions and wording were repetitive, and I kept rereading over them and wasting time because of confusion.

**Q:** If you could rate your confidence in speaking and in writing, one being very uncomfortable and ten being perfect, what would it be for each of them?

**A:** Speaking=8, Writing=4, Reading=7

**Q:** How has your English changed over the years?

**A:** Over the years I have found it easier to talk to people and have more engaging conversations. The more people I meet, the more my English gets better. When I was trying to learn how to speak, I did not even think about reading or writing. When I got more comfortable with speaking, I moved on to reading. Writing has always been the hardest for me.

**Q:** What would you say is the most difficult part about learning English?

**A:** Nothing really . . .

It made me smile and laugh when my dad said “nothing really” in response to me asking him what the most difficult part about learning English was. His modest and nonchalant attitude about learning English not only describes his overall persona but also tells me a lot about his writing research identity. This also connects to his reluctance towards the reader accommodation since he felt confident about his own capabilities and did not want the extra help. He and I both know that he can improve and learn more English, and he has been perfecting his reading, writing, and comprehensive skills over the years through different endeavors that he faced throughout his career. At the same time, interviewing my dad was frustrating because I was trying to get a lengthy and juicy response out of him while he seemed

reluctant. When it comes to other social or life lesson topics, he can talk forever. I guess academia is just not his thing—in English, at least. He isn't comfortable speaking on topics like this because he never has had to, and not getting a lengthy response from him makes sense, considering he did not practice or learn English in a formal, structured way. Overall, this interview helped demonstrate some of the limits of my dad's writing research identity.

On the other hand, the interview also showed me some of the strongest aspects of my dad's writing research identity. For one thing, his willingness and determination to learn new things displays a fantastic characteristic of his identity. This shows how flexible he is across various language-learning experiences. My dad understands that his English is not perfect, and he works each and every day to perfect his skills through his learning experiences. Moreover, the interview spoke to the social aspect of my dad's writing research identity. Even though my dad did a lot of his learning on his own, he often uses others to help him out. Through socializing and talking with many different types of people, my dad's English can grow and be better every day. This is definitely socialization at work because he strongly depends on interactions with others to expand his English performance. Overall, this interview ended up supporting a lot of the observations I made through ISU's version of CHAT.

After analyzing and breaking apart the different components of CHAT, I could clearly see the interconnections of distribution, socialization, and ecology. They all depend on each other, since, if the distribution of the test changes, it will directly affect the socialization or ecology of the test. In my father's case, the socialization of the test was a benefit for him because there were no speaking restrictions, and the instructor was much more helpful and understanding of his language barrier. Although the actual format and textual composition of the test only increased in difficulty a bit, it was the time limitation and individual reading that challenged him the most. Ultimately, all of these components combine to make up my dad's writing research identity.

Growing up with half of my family being bilingual was a very interesting experience. I constantly get phone calls from my uncles and my dad asking for help with English and the Internet. It is mostly questions like "What does this word mean?" or "Can you help me make a resume?" or "Can you write this Facebook post for me?" . . . you get the idea. I love helping them out on their journeys throughout learning the English language. Although the frequency of calls and demand for patience can be annoying, I still enjoy helping them learn and grow. I am thankful for growing up with this influence because I am aware of language barriers, and I see them through a



different lens than most people. I want my family to feel confident expressing themselves and communicating with others, as well as all ESL speakers. I think that people should be more aware and more sympathetic about these language barriers that ESL people face. If everyone helped each other out, it would have a very positive impact on society and immigrants. Using ISU's version of CHAT and primary research, I gained a deeper understanding of my dad's experience and writing research identity, but these concepts can be used on all kinds of situations that you're curious about. And you might help others in the process!



**Jessica Abdelnour** is a sophomore at Illinois State University majoring in Geology and Geography. She loves nature and all things green. Her goal is to move out of Illinois as soon as possible and eventually work for *National Geographic*.