

Goffman's stigma and EAL writers: The author responds to Casanave

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My article on Goffman's stigma and EAL writers was intended as a polemic, so I am grateful that Christine Casanave has taken the time to respond. Casanave begins her response with some face work, so I will do likewise and say that I respect the work that she has done over many years concerning scholarly writing, particularly as it relates to second language writers. She has done much to further this cause. She has also, incidentally, included a co-authored piece by me with Yongyan Li on EAL scholarly writing development (Y-y. Li & Flowerdew, 2008) in her recent co-edited collection (Casanave and X. Li), and Yongyan and I are grateful for that. After her initial facework, Casanave soon arrives at the anticipated "However ..." (paragraph 2, sentence 3) and launches into a critique of my argument. I will accordingly now follow suit and present a reaction to her piece.

From the outset I should make it clear that, as I tried to do in my article, in applying Goffman's theory, I am putting forward a hypothetical case (although illustrated with real-life examples). Nevertheless, while it may appear, as I say in my article, "an exaggeration", it is in fact possible to relate many of Goffman's ideas, unfortunate as the language he uses may be, to the situation in which many EAL scholarly writers find themselves. As Goffman himself stated, stigma may apply to the most "picayune" of cases (although the issue of EAL scholarly writer is far from picayune). In my paper I address the question of how EAL scholars manage their selves in open and in private as revealed in the documented cases I presented. My goal is to articulate the position I see EAL writers potentially finding themselves in and suggest some possible ways of resisting this positioning, as put forward in the section on "resisting stigma".

Casanave's position is that, in relating Goffman's theory of stigma to the situation in which EAL scholarly writers find themselves, I do such writers a disservice and that I present, in her words, "images of EAL writers that are unsavory at best, and inaccurate and paradoxically even more stigmatizing at worst". This comes near the beginning of her piece. Then towards the end she reinforces her position by stating that my discussion "pushes at the boundaries of good taste and hinders scholarly argument". These are strong words, indeed. Ironically, perhaps, from the feminist that I know Casanave to be, this is just the sort of adversative writing that Deborah Tannen (2002), another scholar whom I much admire, has argued against in her article "Agonism in academic discourse", an article in which Tannen critiques the pervasiveness in some forms of academic discourse of argumentation that seeks to draw attention to the supposed weaknesses in the writing of others. A subtler riposte to my position on the part of Casanave, I feel, might have been preferable.

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I would like to contrast Casanave's negative reaction to my piece with an e-mail message that I received from another person in our field, an EAL scholar, as it happens, which contrasts strongly in its tone and message with Casanave's contribution. The e-mail is as follows:

I was reading your JEAP article in press. It is not only an insightful piece but an enjoyable read as well. I love the parts where you quote your informant's mention of the station camera and where you draw the analogy between the impaired hearing group and EAL writers. They are both telling and amusing.

As [name deleted] and I are putting [together] two courses on research writing for our graduate students, I am thinking of proposing a reflective component that deals with the 'stigmatization' issue. The article will be used as a reference for sure.

So whereas, for Casanave, my article is "unsavoury", "inaccurate", "pushes at the boundaries of good taste", and is a disservice to EAL scholarly writers, for this EAL correspondent, my work is "insightful", "enjoyable", "telling", "amusing" and will be used in a course to help students develop awareness on a course in research writing. How are we to account for these divergent views? In layperson's terms, we could say that there is no accounting for taste. The divergence in views reminds me of an article written a long time ago now by Henry Widdowson in dialogue with Norman Fairclough and presented again in his book, *Text, Context, Pretext* (Widdowson, 2002). In this piece, Widdowson referred to the many varied interpretations of Doris Lessing's novel, *The Golden Notebook*, as reported to Lessing in letters from readers. One reader interpreted this novel as being about the sex war. Another claimed that it was about politics. A third reader believed that the theme of the novel was mental illness. All this goes to show that once the writer has let a piece of writing loose on the world they have no control over how it is interpreted.

Another way to explain the divergence in opinions between Casanave and the author of the e-mail might be to invoke Stuart Hall's theory of preferred reading (Hall, 1980). According to Hall's theory, readers may interpret a text in one of three ways. They may interpret it in the way that the author intends, broadly sharing with the author his or her point of view. This is the *preferred* reading. Secondly, they may broadly share the position of the author, but adapt it somewhat to their personal circumstances. This is the *negotiated* reading. Thirdly, readers may understand the author's intended meaning, but be resistant and take up their own contrasting position. This is referred to by Hall as the *oppositional* reading. I would claim that Casanave has taken the oppositional position. She has understood my intended meaning, that I am broadly in sympathy with the predicament of EAL scholarly writers, but she rejects my position of testing out Goffman's theory in the context of EAL scholarly writers, on the grounds that such an enterprise is lacking in taste. This would explain why she concedes that I acknowledge in a caveat that I am aware that my article might be "misread" (Casanave's word) and that this alternative reading was not wished for by me, and why she has nevertheless gone ahead in pursuing her own "misreading". The author of the e-mail, on the other hand, at least on the basis of the message, is fully in sympathy with my argument. They have adopted the preferred reading.

So, Casanave rejects my application of Goffman's theory in relation to EAL writers on the grounds of poor taste. Applying another lay interpretation, this seems to me to be the "sweep it under the carpet" position with regard to discrimination, real or perceived. Early in her article, Casanave describes discrimination towards EAL writers as a "blight" and says that "the problem needs to be recognized and rectified". But, then, in an apparent contradiction, she quickly claims that bringing this issue out into the open is demeaning to EAL writers. At the same time, she downplays the scale of the problem, claiming that, while she does know of cases of discrimination, they are rare and that in her personal experience she has come across few examples of it. Here she seems to pass over the numerous examples that I gave in my article and further examples that I and others have documented elsewhere and which, the serious scholar that she is, she has quite likely read. Although I agree with Casanave that the language used by Goffman would be viewed as "politically incorrect" if he were writing today, it is important to note that for Goffman stigmatisation may not necessarily be a conscious phenomenon, indeed more often than not it is unconscious. Further, as is apparent in some of the examples I cite, stigmatisation may be feared by EAL writers, but may not necessarily be there. This makes stigma all the more pernicious; stigma is not synonymous with stigmatisation (just as, incidentally, fear of discrimination is not the same as discrimination itself).

Casanave's position is that EAL writers are under very similar pressures to those experienced by L1 writers. I am afraid that I just have to totally disagree here. It seems to me that being a second language writer who needs to publish for professional success is not the same as being a first language writer in such a situation. I refer the reader here to the two cases of clandestine editorial work which are cited in my paper: the case of the Hong Kong academic who preferred to receive back an edited manuscript at the train station rather than have the native-speaker editor come to his

university (this is the case of the station camera referred to also by my email correspondent) and the case of the other Hong Kong academic who asked her native speaker mentor not to acknowledge her in places like the faculty restaurant lest the fact that she was receiving editorial assistance be discovered by her peers and superiors. Furthermore, I do not think that L1 scholarly writers would have to resort to the “language re-use” (what many would call plagiarism) practised by EAL post-doctoral research scientists who need to publish in English in order to graduate, as described in Flowerdew and Li (2007). Neither would L1 scholarly writers have to deal with comments such as the following received by members of this same group of Chinese scientists, as reported in Li and Flowerdew (2007:106):

- The English needs considerable editing.
- English grammar needs revision.
- The clarity of the presentation is poor. Many times this is due to grammatical errors (too many to enumerate), but oftentimes the wording is just too difficult to follow.
- The manuscript requires considerable editing as many passages are poorly written.
- The quality of the language is far below the acceptable minimum level, to such a point that many sentences are simply not understandable. The paper cannot be published as it stands.

In defense of the, shall we say, “robust” treatment that EAL writers sometimes receive at the hands of editors and reviewers, Casanave asks her readers to put themselves in the position of an English L1 academic who had to write in Chinese and claims that someone in such a situation would expect to be judged according to the same high standards applied to EAL writers. But the point here is that it is very difficult to imagine an English L1 writer having to ever write in Chinese, unless they were some sort of Sinologist. Most EAL writers, similarly, are not Anglicists. Most EAL writers need to use English as a necessary part of their work, not because they are Anglicists, but because, due to the role of English as the world’s lingua franca, this is the language that is increasingly required to achieve a successful publication record for attaining and maintaining any sort of academic standing. This is why, as Ammon (2000, 2001) has argued, EAL writers are at a natural disadvantage to L1 writers. EAL writers need to spend time acquiring EAL competence, whereas L1 writers grow up with it.

Many EAL writers live in a situation of constant fear, the fear of making a mistake or being criticized, or having their work rejected for what they (rightly or wrongly) suspect may be due to problems with language. Casanave seems to be unaware of this situation. Although the many instances of difficulties encountered by EAL scholars that I have reported in various of my publications might be taken as merely anecdotal, I have taken the trouble to document them quite systematically. To cite another (anecdotal, but documented) example, at the time of writing, just the other day, I had a meeting with an EAL scholar who explained to me the fear she has in submitting her written work for review, the fear of criticism of her English. She not only experiences fear in submitting manuscripts: in everyday communication with native-speakers she feels under pressure not to make a mistake. For example, she spends much longer in preparing e-mails in case they might contain some error. I might also cite the case of EAL scholars I know in other countries who never present papers at conferences or submit papers for publication in English for fear that their language might “not be up to par”. Some scholars in our field, including John Swales (2004), like to claim that the problems encountered by EAL writers are very close to those encountered by L1 writers. Casanave, in her piece, expresses a similar view. While, of course, I must accept that English L1 and EAL scholarly writers have much in common in struggling to achieve publication, I am afraid that I just have to disagree with this position of Swales and Casanave.

So, to conclude what must necessarily be a short piece: Casanave takes issues with my consideration of Goffman’s theory of stigma in relation to EAL scholarly writers, on the grounds that it is demeaning to them to do so. At the same time, she wishes to downplay the issue of discrimination (note that her focus is on discrimination, not stigma, which is not the same thing), being “skeptical” about it being a widespread phenomenon. She is in disagreement with me on two fundamental issues. Given the tone of her writing, I do not have much hope that she will come round to my position on either one of them. Nevertheless, I am grateful that her statement of her position has given a further airing to this important issue of stigma and EAL scholarly writers. In this sense, Casanave’s article has worked against her. She wishes to downplay the issue, but in writing about it, has given it another airing. So my thanks again to her for providing me with an opportunity to express my views further and develop discussion of this important issue in the theory and practice of English for Academic Purposes, an issue which, in spite of Casanave’s protestations, unfortunately, is not likely to go away any time soon.

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