ESSAY

How to write when you are not writing

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(in your native language)

Let's be clear: There is not a secret formula when it comes to writing. You can either sit down and do it, or keep whining about it and never get anything down. So how do you write, especially when you have to do it in a language different from your native one?

I have encountered this problem many times along my journey as an ESL writer who stubbornly insists on writing in English, not in Italian.

I have had a couple of study abroad experiences, so I can safely say my knowledge of English has definitely improved, especially considering that I studied languages for my Bachelor's degree. I have studied in America and in Northern England (shout out to Leeds, lovely city in Yorkshire) before landing in the cold capital London, famous for its restless nights, suits and ties, and that cheap Foster beer from the 24/7 Tescos scattered around the city.

For now, I'm currently working for an online music newspaper based in London, where I have to contribute daily articles in English. As I approached my first day at work I knew that being good was not going to be enough. The main problem I had encountered by writing essays during my abroad experiences was that knowing what I wanted to say and knowing how to say it in English were two entirely different things. There was that cultural barrier and different upbringing that naturally set me apart from the majority of English writers. Language is the main discriminating factor when it comes to two cultures clashing. If you can't grasp the majority of inside jokes, puns and idioms, it's more than likely that you won't be let in on the fun. And British people are well known for their deadpan, sassy, dark humour. Am I right?

So, how was I supposed to win over my natural handicap?

What I didn't realise then, but I'm slowly starting to realise now, is that language is not an absolute. It is not supposed to be perfect. It's an ever-changing environment, where rules sometimes apply, other times don't. It's the perfect ecosystem, precisely because nothing is defined. This is not only what makes it beautiful, but also what helped me realise that this is how I can stand out from the crowd.

While I was striving for perfection and trying to imitate a certain pattern in the English language, I found that the key to writing in another language was to slowly break away from these patterns. Granted, you have to have mastered the language well enough to be able to "break away" from it.

For the mastering part, practice, reading novels, and watching *Fringe* did the job for me. As I was picking up new idioms and expressions, I began to develop my own British/American

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cultural understanding that has certainly influenced my language skills. Add to that a couple of aforementioned experiences abroad, and the leap into a newsroom didn't seem so giant after all.

I would be lying, though, if I said that it has all been a piece of cake. The first day at work I got cold feet as I was not used to thinking and writing in English within a competitive environment with the possibility of my words staying on the internet forever. We are all more self-conscious when we know people are listening, right?

"You guys will have to be on a tight schedule," my boss said the first day I walked into the office. Deadlines were closing in on me like a sharp sword lurking over my shoulder.

"Fair enough," I thought, in perfect British style. This is what I came here for and I was more than happy to get the whole experience. But reality hits you right in the face when you least expect it. Soon my enthusiasm was swapped with the fear of failing.

The first issue that arose was the lack of the right vocabulary. I say "right" because the truth is that we have all been exposed to at least a tiny part (the so-called pop culture) of the Anglo-Saxon's world. So, while I was confident enough that as a language graduate student I knew my fair share of things about the English language, I was not prepared for the reality of it. My thoughts were already set on my Italian way of thinking, made of long, endless syntactic periods, poetic intros (thanks Dante) and old school vocabulary. To master a language means not only to know its syntax, but also all the different slangs and the semantic meanings behind each term.

So, was the last Pale Waves' song *bop* or *pop*? Guess both? A *banger* or a *bangerz* (damn Miley Cyrus)? Was I supposed to *bust* some moves to Drake's "In My Feelings," a song that was clearly *boosting* his career as people were *boasting* about his latest album "Scorpion"?

My head is still recovering from that day. All these linguistic false friends were getting on my nerves. Confusion aside, I decided it was time to turn to my two real friends: Urban Dictionary and WordReference.

I knew they would not let me down. These two have come in handy during hard times and as I was trying to keep track of the words spinning in my head. I'm sure that a lot of people who are approaching, or have approached, a second language have dealt with having different languages mixed up in their heads.

Do you have that specific word at the tip of your tongue but can't quite grasp it? No worries, we've all been there. However, the more you think about it, the less likely it will come to mind. So, for the breaking away part, what I learned is that I'm at my best when I'm less concerned with what I really want to say. "Less is better," my English high school teacher

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used to say to me. May I add, not only is it better, it is far less stressful. I kept ping-ponging between Italian and English in my head, getting more confused in the process. After a couple of weeks, though, I decided this was not going to get me anywhere. Like a scorned lover, I stopped courting the language and gave up, even if that meant more simple, straightforward sentences. Easier said than done, but the work eventually paid off. After reaching the impressive milestone of more than 100 articles, all written in English, I can safely say that it's more than possible to write in English even if it is not your first language.

To all the people out there who are ESL writers, I say: Don't doubt yourself even if you think that the words you are using are not the ones a native speaker would use. First, you are probably adding something new and unique to the language; and second, language can be learned and practiced, so don't lose hope. Throw yourself into it. The key is to not strive for perfection or the perfect sentence. That does not exist, not even in your native language.

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