

Making Your Course “ESL-Ready”¹

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When you ultimately succeed in writing is when you have your own accent. When I speak, my accent reflects who I am and where I come from. Well, I want my writing to reflect me in that way.

-- Tonka, student from Bulgaria (Zawacki & Habib, 2010)

ESL students can become very fluent writers of English, but they may never become indistinguishable from a native speaker, and it is unclear why they should. A current movement among ESL writing teachers is to argue that, beyond a certain level of proficiency in English writing, it is not the students’ texts that need to change; rather it is the native-speaking readers and evaluators (particularly in educational institutions) that need to learn to read more broadly, with a more cosmopolitan, less parochial eye. The infusion of life brought by these ESL students’ different perspectives on the world can only benefit a pluralistic society which is courageous enough truly to embrace its definition of itself.

--Ilona Leki, *Understanding ESL Writers: A Guide for Teachers* (pp. 132-133)

Agenda

- Who are second language writers?
- What coping strategies do second language writers use?
- How can we adapt our courses to be more inclusive to second language writers?

¹ The term “ESL-ready” comes from Matsuda, P. K. (2006). The myth of linguistic homogeneity in U.S. college composition. *College English*, 68(6), 637-51.

Who are second-language writers?

International L2 students: These are visa-holding students studying in the U.S. for a set amount of time, usually with plans to return to the home country afterward. In general, international L2 students:

- Have a wide range of experiences with English in home country; some students will have studied English since elementary school while others will have studied English for only a few years
- Tend to be high-performing students
- Come from a wide range of backgrounds; some will fit the description of what Stephanie Vandrick has called the “global elite”; others will be the one student from their region selected for a scholarship to study abroad
- Tend to have learned English “through their eyes” (Reid): through grammar exercises, memorization of vocabulary, and translation
- Tend to have limited experiences with writing, speaking, and listening in their second language
- May have enrolled in an English Language Institute (ELI) or for-profit English language program prior to enrolling in college, which tend to teach formulaic approaches to writing (thesis-drive, five-paragraph essays) (see Fernandes, 2014, for a description of writing curricula and students at a for-profit English language program)

Resident L2 students: These are students who moved to the U.S. for a wide range of reasons, including seeking a U.S. education, opportunities for work, and political unrest or war in their home country. In general:

- Some will have studied English in home country; others will have only learned English after arriving
- Some will have literacy in first language; others will have had their education disrupted by war and political unrest
- Some will live in ethnic enclaves, using their primary language in their homes and communities
- Many will have experience in U.S. public schools, ranging from 1 or 2 years to longer enrollment
- Tend to have learned English primarily “through their ears” (Reid), through American TV and socializing with peers
- Many will have had limited experience with writing, as high school ESL programs focus on oral communication over written, and ESL students tend to be placed in low tracks in high school, where the emphasis is on grammar and worksheets over extended writing (Ortmeier-Hooper)
- ESL permanent resident students jumped through many hoops to make it to college, so tend to be driven, high-performing students who take advantage of resources available to them at the university

What is generally true about all L2 college writers?

- It takes 5-7 years of being immersed in the target language to become fluent in that language (Cummins).

- Fluency ≠ Native-like; L2 students will retain a “written accent” which may never disappear (Valdés)
- L2 college writers have written across multiple languages, educational systems, cultures, and rhetorics, building important rhetorical knowledge.
- Represent a range of linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds
- Writing development in English influenced by a range of factors including literacy development in their first language, how they encountered the English language, and under what circumstances they developed their second language and writing proficiency

Coping Strategies used by L2 Writers:

- ✦ Asking English L1 peer for feedback on writing (may not be familiar with writing centers) (Phillips, 2014)
- ✦ Selecting topics that allow the student to draw on cultural/linguistic resources (Leki, 1995; Phillips, 2014)
- ✦ Starting reading/writing tasks well ahead of deadline
- ✦ Finding models of the genre (Leki, 1995)
- ✦ Creating word and phrase banks from texts (Cox, 2010)
- ✦ Finding texts on the same topic to cull for phrases, organization, development (may lead to patchwriting)

Characteristics of “ESL Ready” Courses

Assignment design:

- Successful completion of assignments does not depend on knowledge of American history, pop culture, or media that was not part of the course content.
- On the assignment description, the instructor included clear goals (why the assignment was assigned), clear guidelines for completing the project, a clear description of the rhetorical situation, and clear criteria for how the project will be assessed.
- The assignment description is handed out well before the project is due, giving the student more lead-time.
- The assignments allow for the student to draw on knowledge learned in the L1.

Scaffolded writing:

- The writing assignment is presented as a series of discrete steps, which may include prewriting activities, research activities, due dates for early drafts or parts of the draft, and/or peer review sessions.
- Samples of student writing from the same assignment or published writing in the same genre are made available to the students.

Textual ownership:

- On the syllabus or course website, the instructor provided clear criteria for what counts as academic dishonesty in the course, including a clear description of what counts as plagiarism and consequences for plagiarizing.

- Students are given opportunities to practice writing about and with sources in low-stakes assignments.

Peer review and group work:

- Students are guided in giving peer review, so that, in early drafts, feedback focuses on holistic issues (i.e. idea development, focus, organization) before local issues (i.e. grammar and editing).
- Students are guided in giving editing feedback, so that they only point out errors for other students through minimal marking, rather than explain editing decisions
- Before oral peer feedback sessions and group work, the instructor explains the importance of each voice in the group being equally heard and respected, and tells the group that it is everyone's responsibility that every group member makes contributions to the discussion.
- Group work is structured so that there are clear roles for each group member.

Responding to and assessing student writing:

- Before giving feedback to early drafts of L2 student writing, the instructor reads the entire draft without a pen in hand, to understand the draft on its own terms before responding.
- The instructor gives feedback appropriate to the stage of the draft, focusing on holistic issues in early drafts and local issues in more developed drafts.
- Rather than editing for the student, the instructor highlights the areas that require editing. To assess the student's language proficiency, the instructor asks the student to edit all marked areas and to note areas where they don't understand why the text was marked.
- The instructor writes an end comment on the draft, summarizing what the student did well and no more than three areas the instructor would like the student to focus on in the next draft or when writing the next paper.
- The instructor uses a rubric to evaluate papers. The rubric is designed by the instructor and is focused on the paper's learning outcomes, with editing counting for no more than 10% of the grade. When assessing the editing portion of the grade, the instructor only marks down for errors that get in the way of reader comprehension and for errors that had been marked in early drafts by the instructor or peer reviewers as requiring editing (to assess this, the instructor asks all students to turn in marked up early drafts along with the final draft).

Scaffolding reading:

- The instructor provides plenty of lead-time for reading assignments (so that students know what readings are due well ahead of time and the readings are made available to them early on).
- The instructor provides guiding questions, so that students have a sense of what they should be getting out of the text.
- The instructor provides writing-to-learn activities to support the reading process, such as a double-entry journal, annotating the text, or writing in response to a prompt on the reading.

Drawing on multiple language skills:

- The instructor provides opportunities for students to process information through multiple modes, such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, and visual representation.
- The instructor provides opportunities for students to showcase knowledge through multiple modes, such as incorporating oral presentations and the creation of digital videos.
- The instructor makes it clear in the syllabus that multilingualism is valued in the class, by inviting multilingual students to write in their first language in in-class writing, notes, pre-writing, and early drafts. If the instructor welcomes use of multiple languages in more formal projects, the instructor gives students guidelines and examples they can draw on in order to do so.

Statement from my syllabus:

Multilingual Writing: In this section, a range of linguistic backgrounds and levels of English proficiency will be represented. You are invited to use all of your languages as resources in this course. You are welcome to write in a language other than English whenever it is helpful (such as in first drafts and notes), to draw on words and phrases in final drafts of essays that do not have translations in English, to use print- and web-based sources that are written in languages other than English, and to conduct primary research in languages other than English. In this class, I expect “written accent” (missing articles, incorrect prepositions, incorrect verb tenses) to be treated with respect. While all students in this course are expected to challenge themselves to become more effective and accomplished writers in English, we will not spend time worrying too much about the aspects of English that take many years to acquire (i.e. articles, verb tense, prepositions), but instead focus on expression of ideas, communicative competence, and rhetorical savvy.