Understanding ESL Writers' Texts

Strategies for identifying ESL writers

Writing patterns of ESL writers

Writing strategies of ESL writers

ESL writing patterns

Reading on ESL Writers' Texts

Paul Kel Masuda and Michelle Cox
factors is the ESL writer’s L2 proficiency. Many ESL writers are still in the process of developing the intuitive understanding of the English language—its structure and use—and for that reason, they may not be able to produce grammatical sentences as easily as NES writers can. As pointed out in the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers, “the acquisition of a second language and second-language literacy is a time-consuming process that will continue through students’ academic careers and beyond. Moreover, most second-language writers are still in the process of acquiring syntactic and lexical competence—a process that will take a lifetime.”

Because ESL writers often have not internalized some of the rules of grammar, they are often not able to identify errors on their own by, for example, reading the text aloud, a common writing center practice that works well with many NES writers.

Although language proficiency affects the overall quality of ESL texts, the relationship between language proficiency and writing proficiency is not simple; the ability to speak English does not necessarily correspond directly with the quality of texts they produce. Even ESL writers who do not seem to be able to communicate their thoughts in spoken English may be able to write prose that puts many NES writers to shame. This is the case with some international students who have learned English mostly through the medium of writing. Other students are more fluent in spoken English—they may be familiar with a wide variety of colloquial and idiomatic expressions—but they may still produce texts that do not seem to reflect the high level of their spoken fluency. This is typical of so-called Generation 1.5 writers—ESL students who have lived in an English-dominant society for a number of years and acquired English primarily through spoken interactions. Needless to say, these are extreme cases; most ESL writers fall somewhere in-between.

ESL writers’ texts are also shaped in part by their prior experiences with literacy. Although some ESL writers may have received extensive instruction in writing, others have been schooled in educational systems that did not focus on composition. Some ESL writers are highly experienced—some have published—writers in other languages; others have not received instruction in writing beyond the sentence level. Some ESL writers may even be native speakers of a language that does not have a written form. Research on contrastive rhetoric suggests that writers’ linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds may influence texts in various ways as “the nature and functions of discourse, audience, and persuasive appeals often differ across linguistic, cultural and educational contexts.”

It is important to remember that these generalizations do not apply to all ESL students and that not all differences can be attributed to differences in ESL writers’ native language or cultural background. The lack of organization in some ESL texts, as Bernard Mohan and Winnie Au-Yeung Lo have pointed out, may be a result of the overemphasis on grammar in some educational systems. International students, who learn English as a foreign language while in their native country, may have been taught how to compose English sentences but not necessarily entire compositions. As Carol Severino points out in “The ‘Doodles’ in Context,” “organization is often the last feature to be taught and learned in both first- and second-language writing, if it is taught at all.” Experience with composing grammatical sentences, however, does not lead directly to the ability to compose full compositions.

Ways of Reading Difference

In “The Sociopolitical Implications of Response to Second Language and Second Dialect Writing,” Carol Severino draws on Min-Zhan Lu’s framework in describing three stances that readers can take when responding to ESL texts: assimilationist, accommodationist, and separatist. When readers take an assimilationist stance, their goal is to help the ESL writer “write linear, thesis-statement and topic-sentence-driven, error-free, and idiomatic English as soon as possible,” encouraging the writer and her text to assimilate into the dominant culture. The accommodationist, then, reads differences as deficiencies—errors to be corrected.

Readers who take an accommodationist stance may also try to teach the NES norm, but their goal is different from that of the assimilationist. The accommodationist reader’s goal is to help the writer learn new discourse patterns without completely losing the old so that the writer can maintain both his L1 and L2 linguistic and cultural identities. The accommodationist, then, reads differences as, well, differences, explaining to the writer how some differences may be seen as deficiencies by some readers; it is up to the writer “how much like a native speaker” she wants to sound.

When readers take a separatist stance, their goal is further away from the assimilationist goal of teaching ESL writers to write like NES writers. The separatist reader’s goal is to support the writer in maintaining separate linguistic and cultural identities and to advocate for NES readers to read ESL texts “generously” with more appreciation for multicultural writing. The separatist, then, reads to overlook and therefore preserve difference.

The stances come down to ways of reading difference and whether tutors should read to “correct” difference, explain difference, or overlook difference. Severino provides three scenarios showing how she, when conferencing in the writing center, shifted between stances in relation to the writers’ goals and situations. When working with Takaro, a resident ESL student, Severino took an accommodationist approach, focusing first on what Takaro was communicating through the writing, explaining how rhetorical choices are related to situation and audience. When working with Michael, a speaker of a nondominant variety of English, Severino took a separatist approach during the first few sessions—focusing on what Michael was communicating, and encouraging confidence in writing—and then moved toward an accommodationist approach later, to help Michael see how various audiences would read his writing.

In each case, Severino steered clear of the assimilationist stance. She had felt tempted to take this stance after first reading Michael’s writing because
Reading Strategies

When reading a text, one of the first things to notice is the type of writing. Is it a narrative, an expository, a persuasive, or a descriptive? The genre of the text can give you clues about the purpose and tone of the writing.

For example, if you are reading a narrative, you might expect to find a story with a plot and characters. If it is an expository text, you might expect to find information and facts. Persuasive texts aim to convince the reader, while descriptive texts aim to paint a picture with words.

Understanding the genre can help you predict what you might find in the text and how to approach it. You might be looking for a particular type of evidence, such as statistics or examples, in an expository text, while in a persuasive text, you might look for logical arguments or emotional appeals.

In addition to genre, the structure of the text can also provide clues about its purpose. Are there headings and subheadings? Are there lists or tables? These can help you understand how the information is organized and how to navigate it.

The author's purpose and the intended audience can also influence how you read. If the text is written for a general audience, you might expect it to be accessible and straightforward. If it is written for a specific audience, such as experts in a particular field, you might need to be more attentive to specialized vocabulary and concepts.

By paying attention to these features of the text, you can develop a more strategic approach to reading. You can also consider using a variety of techniques, such as skimming, scanning, or annotating, to help you understand and retain the information.

The ESL Reading Section

Understanding and interpreting the text is crucial for success on the ESL Test. The section assesses your ability to read and comprehend a variety of texts, including academic and non-academic materials. To succeed, you will need to be able to identify the main ideas, support your understanding with evidence from the text, and infer meaning from context clues.

This section typically includes a mix of reading passages and questions. The passages can cover a range of topics, from science and technology to culture and society. The questions can take various forms, such as multiple choice, true/false, or fill-in-the-blank.

To prepare for the ESL Reading Section, it is important to practice reading a variety of texts and getting used to the format of the questions. You can also improve your vocabulary and comprehension skills by reading regularly and discussing the texts with others.

In the end, success on the ESL Reading Section comes down to practice and preparation. By developing a strategic approach to reading and improving your skills, you can feel confident on test day and perform to the best of your abilities.
reading somewhere in the middle of the paper. However, if a paper isn’t read to the end, the reader may miss out on information that could clarify the meaning or organization of the paper. The point of the paper may not become clear until the end if the text is organized inductively. Questions that arise in the tutor’s mind while reading the beginning of the paper may be answered toward the end. Reading a piece of ESL writing in full allows the reader to come to an understanding of how the paper is organized on its own terms. Reading to the end of a piece of ESL writing is only beneficial if the reader can suspend judgment while reading—reading past variations in sentence structure, waiting to see how the writer will pull the paper together, maintaining an open mind when the writer’s opinions and beliefs vary substantially from the tutor’s.

Another feature of some ESL writing that may be disorienting is the lack of metadiscourse or signposts—the transitional words and sentences that move readers between ideas and the structures that mark the organization of a text. Even though a text may not have an organization that is immediately recognizable, there may be an organization at work. The trick is to identify and piece together the logic that is not immediately apparent to the reader by formulating questions with the assumption that there is logic in it—by giving the writer the benefit of the doubt.

After reading the whole text for the gist, it is often a good idea to reread the text, this time placing brief marks—such as checkmarks or asterisks—near features or details that seem surprising or those that jar the reading process: the unexpected. It is the unexpected in ESL writing that can make reading ESL writing challenging because it demands tutors become more aware of their tacit expectations for style, rhetorical choices, genre conventions, and relationships to audience. But it is also the unexpected that can teach tutors the most about their own responses to writing. Teachers often call the unexpected occurrences that happen in the classroom “teachable moments” —moments where significant learning could occur. It may be helpful to think of the unexpected in ESL writing with the same positive twist.

To capitalize on the unexpected, the tutor needs to be aware of his or her own responses as a reader. For instance, if a particular passage seems disorienting, the reader can take advantage of this situation by focusing on where he or she started feeling lost and why. What in the text caused the reader to wander? What is it about the reader’s own expectations that contributed to the feeling of disorientation? The reader should also focus on areas where he or she feels “stuck”—unable to generate meaning from the text—and use this experience as an opportunity to consider what would be needed to move forward in the reading process. Does the reader need to ask the writer a question? Does the reader need to mark the area and then move on with reading, in the hope that another section of the paper will help the reader negotiate the challenging section?

Some of the unexpected features of ESL writing may be rich cultural details or unique perspectives that students bring with them. Making note of those details or perspectives that are particularly interesting or insightful to the tutor is useful in encouraging the ESL writer. Sometimes, however, readers of ESL texts can get distracted by their own curiosity about certain details such as descriptions of unfamiliar places, cultures, and ways of thinking. Although these details do make ESL writing compelling to read, they can also lead the tutor away from the writer’s goals and more toward their own goals, which could include asking the writer about their cultures or experiences, leading the reader to become more a tourist than a tutor.

Listening to ESL Writers

People always pay attention to how I say things, and never listen to what I say.

—An undergraduate ESL student

In this chapter, we have suggested that, while ESL writers’ texts may have features that are distinct from NES writers’ texts due to many sources of influence, it is possible to read beyond the differences if tutors can suspend judgments, focus on meaning, and be aware of their own preferences and biases. Ultimately, reading is an act of communication—the act of listening to what the writer has to say. When we listen—truly listen—we treat ESL writers with the respect they deserve, regarding them as peers rather than as uninformed learners of the English language and the U.S. culture. It is only in such an atmosphere of mutual respect that the collaborative pedagogy of the writing center can turn differences into opportunities for growth both for the reader and the writer.

Notes

2. Silva, 668.
4. CCCC Committee on Second Language Writing, 669–70.
5. Cumming, 81–141.
7. CCCC Committee, 670.
15. Santos, 81.
16. Santos, 81; Vann, Meyer, and Lorenz, 432.
Avoiding Appropriation

Carol Severson

5

WORKS CITED

The ESL Teaching Session

46-7

A Study of Faculty Opinion of ESL Courses, "TESOL Quarterly" 18(3);

47(4): 557-71

When the ESL Reservoir is Depleted, TESOL Quarterly

558-78


Second-Language Writing and Other College Composition and

60-62

COCO Committee on Second Language Writing: 2001, "COCO Statement on the ESL Teaching Session at TECO 2001"
At the time I didn’t know how to say either “challenging” or “multiply.” I had also written, rather clumsily, “Before the trip I had read my guidebook with a map,” but the new version read, “I had read my tourist guide and took a look at the topographical map.” Almost every sentence was changed and elevated to a higher register. I wondered if my original wordings were grammatically incorrect or just not as native- and mature-sounding as these new, improved ones. Perhaps my well-meaning, hard-working Italian teacher thought that it was inappropriate for a middle-aged American professor to sound like a grade-schooler. Realizing that his embarrassment for me might have motivated his editing, I felt ashamed of myself and the quantity and quality of his changes. Humbling second language (L2) writing experiences such as this one (I have had many others) have enabled me to identify with the feelings of ESL writers who may also have overzealous teachers and tutors.

**Reformulation and Appropriation**

Helpful and generous as he was, my Italian teacher had revised my writing so it no longer sounded like me or reflected the state of my L2 learning at the time. Ironically, I liked my original simple and nonidiomatic style; my hybrid Italian American voice expressed who I was and what I knew. On the other hand, I continued to learn from his edits; whenever I reread my transformed essay, I reinforce the authentic native expressions that real Italians use. The intent of my teacher’s “few corrections,” after all, was not to humble or discourage me but to teach me the authentic Italian I needed to replace my interlanguage “Inglesiano.”

Such language learning is the main justification for the teaching strategy called *reformulation* that my teacher used. Reformulation is recommended as an optional tutoring strategy for English as a second language (ESL) students. Reformulation is a tool for L2 learning in general because it is said to cause learners to “notice” differences between their version and the native speaker’s version of a passage and to learn from realizing the discrepancies. Reformulation in this context means correcting and revising L2 writing, making it not only more grammatical but also more idiomatic and native-sounding. In effect, reformulating involves “native-speaker-izing” L2 writing—changing the wording so that the writing sounds more like first language (L1) writing. To be accurate in our discussion, though, we should posit a continuum of L2 and L1 writing instead of thinking in terms of two opposites: L1 versus L2 writing. When we think of L1 and L2 writing as points on a continuum, reformulation means reducing the number of L2 features and increasing the number of native language features. Thus, the number of reformulations can range from slight to extensive.

For example, here is a sentence that Satomi, an ESL writer working in our writing center, wrote in her personal essay about calligraphy for her rhetoric class:

> It is said that in Japan to write own names well is to represent how intelligent people are.

Many options exist for revising Satomi’s sentence—from correcting the only actual grammar error (*one’s own name vs. own names*) to reformulating and “naturalizing” the sentence with gerunds and eliminating the copula is and infinitive to represent:

> It is said in Japan that writing one’s name well represents how intelligent people are.

A second further reformulation would be to use the more idiomatic expression “a sign of” that might be in Satomi’s passive but not active working vocabulary:

> It is said in Japan that writing one’s name well is a sign of intelligence.

Yet a third, more extreme option would be to eliminate the passive voice expression “It is said”:

> The Japanese say that writing one’s name well is a sign of intelligence.

Which reformulations would we say preserve Satomi’s voice? Which distort or remove Satomi’s voice? To what extent would such a judgment about the resulting voice depend on Satomi’s input into the decisions of whether and how much to reformulate?

On some occasions, such as with my Italian essay or perhaps with the third option for Satomi’s sentence, when writing has been reformulated, we might evaluate the changed product as having been *appropriated*, or taken away from the student writer by the teacher, tutor, or editor. Appropriation usually involves the writer feeling, as I did when reading my Italian professor’s corrections, a loss of voice, ownership, authorship, or emotional and intellectual connection to the writing and how it was composed. Such an event—when control of a text is removed from an author who then feels alienated from it—might be considered an “act of appropriation” although undoubtedly one can still learn language and about language use from the experience. On other occasions, however, when language has been reformulated in whole or in part by a teacher, tutor, or editor, for example, with the consent and participation of the student, we might conclude that the student’s writing has not been appropriated. What are the situational factors that influence the evaluation of an act of reformulation as appropriation or not? In this chapter, after giving a brief overview of the history of appropriation, I identify and discuss some of these situational factors with the help of tutors from the University of Iowa Writing Center, all of whom work intensively with ESL students.

**Some Background on Appropriation**

In Composition Studies, issues of appropriation first arose in relation to native speakers of English (L1 writers) and the topics and content of their papers. As Lil Brannon and Cy Knoblauch have pointed out, teachers often wrest the direction of their students’ writing from them so that they will write about what
The Trade-Off Between Voice and Audience Language

I've been thinking about how voice and audience language are important in different contexts. When I say voice, I mean the language that the writer uses to express their ideas, whereas audience language refers to how the writer adapts their language to the reader's background knowledge and expectations. Understanding the balance between these two is crucial for effective communication. When you write for an audience, you need to consider what the audience already knows and what they need to learn. This can be challenging, as different audiences may have different backgrounds and experiences.

Appropriation and Position and Second Language Writers

When writing in a second language, it's important to be mindful of your audience's perspective. Your language choices can reflect your cultural background, and this can sometimes be perceived as an imposition on the reader. It's crucial to balance the need to be authentic with the need to be inclusive. When writing for a diverse audience, it's important to consider the different experiences and perspectives of your readers. This means being aware of cultural references and idiomatic expressions that may not be accessible to all. It's also important to consider the implications of using a particular language or style. For example, using a more formal language may be appropriate in academic writing, but it may not be as effective in informal communication. The key is to find a balance that works for your audience.
learners, who are usually residing in their own country learning the language of another. At stake for L2 learners are grades, scholarships, graduate school, publication, employment, income, quality of life and attendant status, prestige, confidence, and self-esteem. With such pressures and challenges, more ESL writers may be more willing to trade some of their voice for accuracy, idiomaticity, and increased language learning. If I as a tutor had made the equivalent changes in the essay of an ESL student in the writing center, would she also feel as if I had appropriated it? Probably not—if she had expressed the desire to sound as native as possible, if she had participated in making the changes, and if I had done my best to explain why particular expressions were ungrammatical or unidiomatic. Several things contributed to my sense of appropriation: I had been satisfied with sounding nonnative, I did not understand the reasons for my teacher’s changes, and I had not participated or been offered any control in making them.

Avoiding Appropriation

We can identify from these discussions the situational factors that can contribute to avoiding appropriation in tutoring ESL students in the writing center. When and how are we more likely to avoid appropriation? Paralleling the discussion of the continuum of L2 and L1 writing features, appropriation should also be discussed in terms of probabilities and of graduations on a continuum of tutor and writer control and directiveness, as Straub recommends, and not in terms of absolutes. It is not always clear—to a tutor or even to an outside observer such as a researcher—when appropriation has taken place, except possibly when a writer thinks and feels at a gut level that it has. If the notion of “appropriation” is applied in a judgmental fashion every time a tutor suggests changing an expression on an ESL student’s paper and replacing it with a more idiomatic one—a labeling that Reid calls a “myth of appropriation,” it will cause unnecessary tutor anxiety, paralysis, and guilt, and the term will ultimately lose its meaning. The myth of appropriation also denies the student agency. According to Christine Tardy’s broader, alternate view, appropriation is not only negative and unidirectional but also can be positive and dialogic when the student writer has agency to make decisions as well as the teacher. Tardy maintains that student writers in control can also appropriate from peers, teachers, and texts while maintaining ownership of their texts. (See also Canagarajah and Prior as cited by Tardy for other alternative, positive models of appropriation.)

To avoid the negative, unidirectional appropriation of a student’s work, tutors should strive to do the following:

1. Address expressed needs. We are more likely to avoid appropriation when students, especially more advanced students and English learners, tell us that they want their writing to sound as much like that of native English speakers as possible. We can endlessly debate whether ESL writers should feel they should sound like native speakers rather than themselves, but the fact is many do, especially advanced undergraduates and graduates, faculty, and visiting scholars; the feedback and pressure they receive from their professors, their supervisors, their dissertation advisors, and their journal editors convinces them that they need to feel this way.

According to Kathy Lyons, formerly a tutor at University of Iowa and now program coordinator for the nonprofit organization Iowa Shares,

When you factor in what’s at stake for these more advanced students (opportunities for publication, the need to write a defensible thesis, jobs), it seems wrongheaded to resist their desire to gain mastery over American writing styles. . . . In resisting the request of an ESL student to help with learning the “American way” or simply the “standard English” way of expressing something, we might be doing a great disservice, though with the best of intentions. We should be prepared to do what’s in the student’s best interest and to allow her to learn what she feels is important to her own professional and/or educational advancement if that is what she is asking us to do.

However, shouldn’t we work to convince the gatekeepers in graduate and professional schools and in academic departments and on editorial boards that L2 writers will probably always write with an accent? We should support the efforts the field of L2 writing has made, such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s resolution to educate teachers about the length of the L2 writing acquisition process, and how, according to Virginia Collier, it takes at least seven years to acquire an academic vocabulary. (See Chapter 4 for more about this.) Yet until the effects of globalization are more strongly felt and teachers and other gatekeepers are sufficiently educated and become more tolerant of accents and nonnative features in writing, some ESL students will ask to be taught how a native English speaker would say what they suspect they are saying awkwardly. Such requests might put pressure on a hands-off tutor into taking what I have called a more assimilationist stance so that the student’s writing will blend better into the linguistic mainstream of American academic English.

Yiyun Li, a Chinese English bilingual who formerly tutored at the University of Iowa and is now a creative writer teaching at Mills College, generally agrees with Lyons when it comes to responding to students’ expressed needs. Her perspective as an ESL writer who has both tutored and been tutored is especially valuable:

As an ESL student myself, I understand that students really hope to learn the most correct English from our tutors. I remember in our writing center class last year, we talked about whether we should want our
Avoiding Appropriation

If tutors are not sure how unique or how much like native English speakers their students want to sound, they should ask them rather than guess. They should have a frank discussion of the pros and cons of leaning toward either pole. Such metadiscourse—communicating about how to communicate—is probably the most significant way to avoid appropriation. For confusing passages, tutors can generate with the student’s help two or three options that vary in idiomaticity, style, or register and have the student choose among them as in the previous options for revising Satomi’s sentence.

2. Ask writers to participate in reformulation decisions. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if students actively participate in the reformulation and revision process and, more important, in the metadiscourse about the process. According to the Interaction Hypothesis, such participation is said to increase the chance that language learning takes place, as Jennifer Ritter points out.\(^{25}\) Even if ESL students request a reformulation of their paper, when a tutor revises for them rather than with them, it is possible that that tutor crosses the line, as Molly Wingate says,\(^ {24}\) into appropriating the students’ texts. Ex-tutor LuAnn Dvorak, now teaching at UCLA, tells students who pressure her to change all incorrect or nonidiomatic features that they will not learn if she fixes everything for them; there is just too much new language in new contexts, she explains, for them to process in too little time and with too little participation on their part.\(^ {25}\)

One common way for the student to participate is to read her own paper aloud and stop or put a check mark when she thinks a passage does not communicate well because it is ungrammatical, unnatural, or both. The tutor might stop her when he does not understand a passage to ask her if she can explain it. Another way for the student to participate more is for tutors to participate less, thus balancing the interaction. To establish this balance, we need to monitor the ways in which we are participating. Megan Knight, another University of Iowa writing center tutor and rhetoric teacher, tries to limit herself to asking ESL students questions and mirroring what they have said.\(^ {26}\)

3. Avoid misrepresenting the student’s language level on the page. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if our recommended changes and the resulting reformulation do not project a level of language proficiency and sophistication that is inaccurate. Intermediate ESL students should not come across as advanced on a paper after a few trips to the writing center. Ethical issues are involved in misrepresenting the student’s language level to outside audiences of teachers and other gatekeepers. Such misrepresentation is unfair not only to these audiences but also to the students themselves. What if I submitted my teacher’s revision of “Un Viaggio a Venezia” to an Italian program and was admitted on the basis of my supposed ability to manipulate the language but then could not understand

students to write like Americans. The concern was that they would lose their uniqueness. But a lot of times, this uniqueness is just what makes them uncomfortable about their own writings. For myself, I usually ask my readers to point out all things that sound unusual for a native speaker. Some of them I know I have put in intentionally to give the writing a little foreign-ness, but with others, I just don’t know the right ways, and I always feel happy to learn how to say them right.\(^ {20}\)

Bilingual ex-tutor Carmen Mota, a professor at Venezuela’s University of the Andes, feels the same way about her English academic writing:

In spite of my intentions to reduce [my writing center students’] anxiety by stressing their potentials as writers, I started to feel the same pressure when writing my own dissertation. I always wanted to be reassured that my ideas were clearly expressed. For this reason, I usually asked a native speaker to read over my various drafts and point to those ideas that did not sound right.\(^ {21}\)

Bilingual tutor Xia Zhu from China feels similar pressures in her academic writing:

Many of my professors have emphasized that they never use a double standard to evaluate our academic work just because we are international students. I take it as acceptance and trust of our academic ability from our professors as well as a responsibility for us to write our papers as clearly as we can. This may partially explain why we always want our writing to sound as much like that of native English speakers as possible. To sound foreign is not a problem for me, but when it creates confusions and misunderstandings of what I really want to express, that’s where I need to have my papers checked by an English speaker to make sure I have used conventional English before getting them submitted or published.\(^ {22}\)

Writer-tutors like Li, Mota, and Zhu would want tutors to point out instances of inadvertent or intentional poetry in their writing so they can decide whether they want to leave them in their texts or reformulate them. Such writers want control over when they are sounding foreign or even, ironically, when they are sounding inappropriately colloquial—for example, when they are using the word stuff incorrectly or overusing it to try to sound like native English speakers. If their writing contains foreign features, they want to know it is because of a conscious decision on their part, not an accident or a result of not knowing an expression or idiom. In this case, the ESL writer paradoxically has control over the tutoring situation even when it seems that the tutor has more control over the writer’s language. What might seem like appropriation to an outsider unfamiliar with the expressed needs of the writer is actually a balanced tutorial interaction.
Difficulty in understanding context and elaboration of ideas: the main issue in EFL learning

Problem 1: Difficulty in understanding context and elaboration of ideas: the main issue in EFL learning

Read the following text and answer the questions that follow.

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Recondition the recommendation: We are more likely to overlook the

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The ESLsin questionnaire: We are more likely to overlook the

7. Use appropriate writing strategies: We are more likely to overlook the

1. The ES\text{L}sin questionnaire: We are more likely to overlook the

4. Account for context: We are more likely to overlook the

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time for them, but “this is the way we say it in English” should not be our explanation for every change or replacement.

9. **Try to assess language learning.** We are more likely to avoid appropriation if the student learns new language or more about using language from the interaction and reformulation. It is difficult to determine whether learning has taken place because writing centers do not test and they often don’t see the same students regularly enough to monitor their learning. Yet, tutors who find themselves correcting and explaining the same features week after week should be aware that the student is possibly not participating enough in the exchange or the explanations are not communicated well (see Chapter 2).

10. **Consider the type of writing.** We are more likely to avoid appropriation if we gauge the purpose, genre, and type of writing we are working on with the student. Informal writing, narratives, and reader responses may benefit more from nonidiomaticity and features of the student’s unique voice; formal essays, abstracts, proposals, and dissertations may benefit less. For example, if Satomi writes in a personal essay that her hometown is “abundant of green,” we might let it go and not comment about it at all. Or we might compliment her on her poetic phrasing but at the same time mention that native English speakers might say “abundantly green” or “very green.” But if Satomi writes “abundant of green” to describe a land mass in a formal geography paper, we would more likely point out the lack of idiomaticity and offer the previous options. These decisions—whether to point out such instances and whether and how to change them, even in personal writing—should be negotiated with the student.

**A Ten-Step Program?**

To avoid appropriation, must all ten conditions be met and all the strategies implemented within a tutoring session? Some of these conditions and strategies are undoubtedly more significant than others. The first three are especially important. Responding to the writer’s expressed needs and feelings (condition 1), ensuring the writer’s participation (condition 2), and not misrepresenting the writer’s second language proficiency level (condition 3) are probably the more important criteria and advice for avoiding appropriation, although not necessarily in that order. Most important, periodic metacommunication and perception checking about whether and how to reformulate will work to help tutors avoid taking control over ESL students’ texts and voices. According to bilingual ex-tutor Kai Lin Wu, now a professor at Tunghai University in Taiwan, tutors must establish a balance between their own direction and control and the student’s, which depends on the student’s second language level and experience:

> Establishing a balanced relationship between the student writer and the tutor-reader is one way to avoid appropriation. Students’ texts are where ESL writers and tutors negotiate meanings. Some ESL writers, especially those with little or no L2 writing instruction, need more directive feedback from tutors because they are probably still seeking a voice to express themselves in a new academic setting. When tutors grant to ESL students the authority of writers, they would also need to take on the responsibility of responsive readers. Just as the travelers in my Italian essay negotiated and compromised but still met their needs and goals, so should tutors and ESL writers.

**Notes**

13. Reid, 290.
17. CCCC Statement on Second Language Writers.
19. Severino, 190.
20. Yiyun Li, personal communication.
23. Ritter, 104.
24. Wingate, 9.
26. Megan Knight, personal communication.
27. Olga Kulikova, personal communication.
28. McAndrew and Reigstad, 42.
Looking at the Whole Text

Jennifer E. Staben and Kathryn Dempsey Nordhaus

"What should I do? I feel torn," a new peer tutor writes in her weekly journal. The emotion she feels comes from the tension of conflicting demands. On the one hand, many voices are telling her to avoid an initial focus on grammar in her tutoring sessions. Her textbook, The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring, recommends working on higher-order concerns like focus, development, and organization before addressing a student's editing concerns; there's even a table that contrasts her role of tutor with the role she's not supposed to play—that of editor. This philosophy has been echoed in many of the articles she has read for her tutor development course and in the discussions she has had in class with her fellow tutors. Yet, week after week, second language writers sit down beside her, pull out their drafts, and voice their grammar concerns: "Can you check my grammar?" "I'm worried about my grammar." "My English is terrible. Can you help me with it?"

Because writing centers strive to be student-centered, writing conferences with English as a second language (ESL) students often make tutors feel that they are faced with an impossible choice: Comply with the ESL students' invitations to focus on grammar and other surface errors or ignore the ESL students' requests and focus on the whole text. Opting for the former often leaves tutors feeling like traitors to the cause: They have helped contribute to the perpetuation of the image of a writing center as a "skills center, a fix-it shop." Opting for the latter, however, sometimes leaves tutors feeling more like intruders than collaborators, especially when the writers they're working with actively or even passively resist this more holistic focus.

What's a tutor to do? Though there are no easy solutions to the tension this apparent dichotomy produces, the dichotomy itself is false: Tutoring objectives are rarely as simple as either grammar or the whole text. Yet even in situations when the student and the text pull you toward focusing solely on grammar, we believe there are reasons to resist. ESL students, like their native English-speaking (NES) counterparts, have much to gain from looking at the whole text.

"Looking at the Whole Text"

Muriel Harris and Tony Silva succinctly explain why new writing center tutors are tempted to approach conferences with ESL writers differently than they approach conferences with NES writers: "To the untrained tutor's eye what is most immediately noticeable is that a draft written by an ESL student looks so different." In short, the surface errors, when combined with ESL students' hesitancy, accent, and uncertainty, can make language issues appear more urgent than they really are—to tutors and students alike. In response to this perceived urgency, tutors tend to become language police, focusing on issues like sentence structure and word choice.

Sentence-level assistance can be helpful to ESL students. However, it robs both ESL students and their tutors of an opportunity to learn so much more. As Kenneth Bruffee writes in "Peer Tutoring and the 'Conversation of Mankind',"

We create knowledge or justify belief collaboratively by cancelling each other's biases and presuppositions; by negotiating collectively toward new paradigms of perception, thought, feeling, and expression; and by joining larger, more experienced communities of knowledgeable peers through assenting to those communities' interests, values, language, and paradigms of perception and thought.

The community to which both peer tutor and ESL student are being introduced is a community of academic writers whose language, conventions, and expectations are new and foreign. It is, in short, a foreign culture—and it's a culture that is often underestimated in terms of its significance and scope.

Most writing tasks in U.S. colleges and universities are based on cultural conceptions about clear writing and effective argumentation—ideas that may not be shared by ESL writers and may indeed run counter to the ideas about academic writing that the writers bring with them. In Listening to the World, Helen Fox tells countless stories about how upper-level undergraduate and graduate students, proficient and sometimes professional writers in their first language, struggle less with the linguistic aspects of English and more with U.S. academic expectations of how writers construct arguments, utilize outside authorities, and even incorporate personal experience and viewpoints into academic texts. Fox suggests that this struggle is not simply an issue of adopting a different style of writing; U.S. academic texts require students to assume different ways of viewing the world and their place in it. Similarly, when Fan Shen discusses his own experiences as a writer moving from a Chinese academic culture to a U.S. context, he explains that making the transition was not as simple as switching pronouns—from we to I. Instead, he had to learn to create a more individualistic stance for himself when he wrote essays in his English composition course—one that not only used the pronoun I but valued it in a different way.
Use the Power of Paper

It is vital to know when talk is not enough. The spoken word can be extremely powerful, but when placed on a page, writers tend to think of it as permanent. This perceived permanence of words on paper can be intimidating to writers and can especially block ESL writers. However, there are ways you can harness the power of paper to work for the student’s benefit.

One of the simplest things you can do for students is to serve as a scribe. Some students who are not fluent speakers of English may be fluent writers if they learned English mainly through writing and reading. On the other hand, some ESL students speak more fluently and have no problems expressing themselves verbally because they don’t stop to translate what they want to say; they simply say it. However, when it comes to putting words to a page, their process might be more arduous. Initially, they might write their thoughts in their first language and then translate their ideas. Or, they may write their thoughts in a mixture of both languages, planning to “smooth it out” later. Both of these processes can affect the product. If you suspect this may be the case or if you are having a difficult time understanding what the student has written, ask the student for clarification and write down his response. Although this is a common practice for working with NES writers, it may be even more important for ESL writers who are balancing several complex cognitive tasks at once.

Another way you can use paper to the students’ advantage is to get away from words. We regularly use outlines or lists with students in the writing center—ESL students should not be an exception. You might also consider graphically illustrating the various elements of a piece of written work (introduction, body, conclusion), showing the relative size and importance of each, along with some notations about what kinds of things might be included in each element. These illustrations can be used to represent both the forms the writer is trying to learn and the actual structure of the writer’s text.

The benefits of using a separate sheet of paper are many. You can help loosen up a blocked ESL student by turning her attention from a troublesome sentence or paragraph and helping her see the big picture. ESL writers who are visual learners may benefit more from graphic representations than verbal explanations. In addition, by creating a picture or a list or an outline together, you are giving the ESL writer something physical to take with her—an additional reference she can consult as she seeks to revise her writing.

Complicating Matters

In this chapter, we have tried to review one of the challenges you’re likely to face when working with ESL students in the writing center: finding ways to pull students’ attention toward higher-order concerns such as focus, development, and organization and away from lower-order concerns such as grammar or word choice. It sounds like a simple goal, but it’s an extremely complex issue with no easy solutions. To a certain extent, it is this complexity that presented the two of us with unexpected challenges when writing this chapter. We kept getting sidetracked by “what-ifs.” We’d like to share some of these “what-ifs” here because they’re the kind of complications you may encounter.

What if the student is a repeat customer and has already been to the writing center several times to work on content and organization? What if the student is insistent about working on language only? What if one of the myriad factors that can affect the focus of a writing conference (the time pressure of last-minute visits to the writing center, a tutor’s awareness of a particular instructor’s grading criteria, and/or a tutor’s desire to be helpful and student focused) does affect the conference? In these situations, it’s important for tutors to remember several things:

- You don’t have to choose between substance and grammar. Though the goal is to focus as much as possible on higher-order concerns, it doesn’t necessarily mean you should focus on these concerns to the exclusion of everything else.
- Most students’ time is at a premium: They are students, employees, daughters, fathers, friends, and so on. They need to use their time wisely; if they truly have little need for additional discussion of higher-order concerns (as in the case of the repeat customer), their time—and yours—may be best spent on issues of language. However, even these situations provide room for conversation. Try to find out why the student made the language choice she made, and you may discover entirely new areas to discuss. A misplaced comma might lead to a discussion of how punctuation is used in Spanish—or Hindi or Korean—and how that might affect the relationship between author, audience, and text.
- Your students’ needs are driven by the situation in which they find themselves. Our preference to focus on higher-order concerns stems largely from our desire to address the majority of our students’ needs. We support a community college with a significant ESL population from a wide range of backgrounds—from international students with multiple degrees earned in their native countries to immigrant students who are inexperienced writers in English and their native language—but the majority of our ESL students are inexperienced writers in any language, and they tend to benefit most from assistance with larger textual issues. In environments with upper-level undergraduate or graduate ESL students, it might be more appropriate to shift the balance toward the middle ground between text and language—or shift more toward language.

Finally, remember the cornerstone upon which every writing center is founded: trust. You are working with the student. You are there to read her body language, inflection, facial expressions, motivation, and intensity. You must trust yourself and your instincts to make the right decision based on the
Meeting in the Middle
Bridging the Construction of Meaning with Generation 1.5 Learners
Jennifer J. Ritter and Trygve Sandvik

A Day in the Writing Center

It's one of those typical dark, winter mornings when we walk into the Writing Center at the University of Alaska Anchorage (UAA). Beatrice is reading Jared's literacy narrative for his freshman composition class. Jared moved to Alaska ten years ago when he was in the air force. After he retired from the service, he decided to stay in the Last Frontier, and he is currently working toward his elementary education degree. Another tutor, Stacy, is working with Natalia, a logistics major and international student from the Russian Far East, who is writing a report for her purchasing and supply management course. Tara is just finishing her tutorial session with Judy, an Alaska Native from Kodiak, who moved to Anchorage in hopes of entering the nursing program. She is working on her digital annotated bibliography from her developmental writing class. Our tutors are much like those in many writing centers. Many are undergraduate students, mostly English majors. Some are graduate student teaching assistants and future composition instructors. Tara, for instance, is an undergraduate English major with plans to teach English overseas, followed by graduate school back in the states.

The next student waiting for a tutor is one who Tara has not seen in the writing center before. When she sits down for the tutoring session, Victor puts his paper on the table in front of them, leans far back in his chair, his legs extended and crossed, and uncomfortably fidgets as he explains his assignment:

Victor: This is my paper. It's a mini-summary response paper. It's a summary of the story that we read and thinking about the issue,