ESL Writers

A Guide for Writing Center Tutors

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Reading an ESL Writer's Text

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In this chapter, we discuss the part of a writing center conference that is at the center of the conferencing process—the reading of the writer's draft. Although the process of reading may be the least visible part of the conference, it is one of the most important because it is during this process that tutors begin to formulate their initial responses to the text. In many cases, reading texts written by English as a second language (ESL) writers—whether they be resident or international students—is not radically different from reading those written by native English-speaking (NES) writers; tutors can use many of the same principles and strategies they use in reading NES texts. Yet, because ESL writers often come from different linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, some aspects of ESL writers' texts may stand out, especially to the eyes of native English speakers who do not have extensive background in working with ESL writers.

Some of the initial reactions to ESL writers' texts may be quite positive. Inexperienced readers of ESL texts may be fascinated by details about the ESL writer's native language, culture, country, or stories of how they or their family came to the United States. Some may be intrigued by the extensive use of metaphors and figurative language in some ESL writers' texts. Others may be amazed by how much the writers have accomplished with a language they did not grow up with. Yet others may note the richness of ESL writer's texts that come from their hybridity and alternativeness.[1] Unfortunately, not all encounters with ESL texts produce such generous responses. Readers with little or no experience in working with ESL writers may be drawn to surface-level errors and differences that they see as problematic.

Readers may find differences between NES and ESL writers' texts at various levels—from word formation to sentence structure to organization. The texts may contain many errors, such as missing articles, "wrong" prepositions and verb endings, and unusual sentence structures that "just don't sound right." The word choices may seem odd, or the use of idiomatic phrases may seem

inappropriate. The organization of the text may not resemble what NES readers might expect. The thesis statement may be missing or located in places where the reader does not expect to find it, such as near the end of the paper. In a persuasive writing assignment, the writer's stance may not be clear. For a research paper assignment, the writer may have written a paper filled with allusive references without citing the sources. While these generalized statements may sound familiar to those who are used to working with inexperienced NES writers, the specific ways in which these differences appear in ESL writers' texts often differ from those written by NES writers.

Because of these and other differences, ESL writing is sometimes seen as "deficient," especially when it is evaluated in comparison with texts produced by NES writers. In "Toward an Understanding of the Distinct Nature of L2 Writing," Tony Silva synthesized research studies comparing ESL and NES writers and writing. The picture of ESL writers and their texts that emerged from the synthesis was overwhelmingly negative: Second language (L2) writing is "simpler and less effective (in the eyes of L1 [first language] readers) than L1 writing"; composing in an L2 is "more constrained, more difficult, and less effective"; "L2 writers' texts are less fluent (fewer words), less accurate (more errors), and less effective (lower holistic scores)."[2] As Silva points out, however, it may be unreasonable to use the same criteria to evaluate ESL texts and NES texts. Based on the findings of his review, Silva suggests the need to ask questions such as: "When does different become incorrect or inappropriate? and What is good enough?"[3]

It is important to realize that differences are not necessarily signs of deficiency. In fact, some of the differences may reflect the writer's advanced knowledge of conventions in other languages or in specific English discourse communities including disciplines with which the tutor may not be familiar. Yet, readers may find the differences distracting when, for example, the text contains certain kinds of errors or too many errors, or when the text is organized in ways that do not match a reader's understanding of the particular genre or other conventions. In some cases, tutors may be drawn to those differences so strongly that they feel lost or frustrated; they may even feel unqualified to work with ESL writers. The initial fear that some tutors have in working with ESL writers is not insurmountable. Becoming familiar with some of the characteristics of ESL texts and their sources can help tutors work with ESL writers with more confidence, read beyond the differences, and recognize the strengths of those texts more easily.

Understanding ESL Writers' Texts

ESL writers and their texts vary widely from individual to individual and from situation to situation, and overgeneralization should be avoided. Still, it is useful to understand some of the general characteristics of many ESL writers and their texts as well as various sources of influence. One of the important

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. . . . Furthermore, most second-language writers are still in the process of acquiring syntactic and lexical competence—a process that will take a lifetime."[4] 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.[5] 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.[6]

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—even 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."[7]

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.[8] 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."[9] 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,"[10] encouraging the writer and her text to assimilate into the dominant culture. The assimilationist, 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.[11]

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

she felt "stunned" by the number of errors in the text. However, she resisted the urge in order to remain consistent with the writing center pedagogy. Instead, she "responded to his piece as an act of communication, which it was, rather than as a demonstration of how well Michael knew and/or could apply the rules."[12]

Inexperienced readers of ESL texts tend to lean toward the assimilationist approach out of their desire to help ESL writers. In doing so, however, they inadvertently read difference as deficiency. As readers makes the effort to move away from the deficiency model, however, they become more open to understanding their own responses to ESL writing and to learning from the writer. Today, many second language writing specialists advocate for a broader definition of what counts as "good writing," urging NES readers to see "accented English" as part of that spectrum. In *Understanding ESL Writers*, Ilona Leki writes,

> 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 and less parochial eye.[13]

According to Leki, the assimilationist goal of making ESL writing indistinguishable from NES writing is unrealistic. In many cases, the assimilationist stance is also undesirable because it leads to the imposition of the norms of dominant U.S. academic discourse as well as various cultural values that come with it.

Resisting the Assimilationist Stance

Those who take the assimilationist stance do not usually have malicious intent. As Severino suggests, people who take the assimilationist stance often do so in order to "smoothly blend or melt [the ESL writer and their text] into the desired discourse communities and avoid social stigma by controlling any features that[,] in the eyes of audiences with power and influence[,] might mark a writer as inadequately educated or lower class."[14] In other words, the assimilationist stance may be an attempt to protect the ESL writer from other readers—especially those readers who have institutional authority over ESL writers. Tutors may feel the same responsibility and may try to represent what they consider to be the possible response from the intended audience of the ESL writer's text: the professor.

Sometimes ESL writers come into the writing center because they were told by their professors to visit the writing center to get their drafts "cleaned up" or to work on their "grammar." From these experiences with professors' reactions to ESL writing, tutors may believe that professors tend to be assimilationists. While there are professors who do approach ESL students with assimilationist intentions, several error gravity studies—studies that review which errors tend to attract more attention by specific groups of readers—show that many professors are more tolerant of differences in ESL writing, or at least of certain types of differences, than of those in NES writing.

Terry Santos, for example, showed that professors were able to overlook local errors—errors that do not directly affect meaning—such as articles, prepositions, spelling, comma splices, or pronoun agreement.[15] Studies of error gravity generally show that professors tend to react more negatively to global errors—errors that affect the comprehension of meaning—such as the wrong word choice, word order, and verb tenses.[16]

One of the implications of error gravity studies is that tutors may want to focus more of their attention on global errors rather than on local errors when reading ESL texts. It may not be possible to define global and local errors in terms of particular grammatical features because whether and how a particular error affects meaning depends on the context. Instead, tutors can prioritize their responses by paying attention to their own initial reactions to particular errors that seem to interfere with their understanding of the meaning of the text. As discussed in the next section, this approach applies to not only grammatical errors but also other aspects of writing.

Reading Strategies

Though each writing center session demands different approaches, there is a general process of reading ESL writing that can be useful. It is generally a good idea to start with a quick reading of the ESL writer's text, focusing on what the writer is trying to communicate and how the paper is organized. A common practice among tutors is to ask writers to read their draft aloud during the conference, rather than the tutor read the draft silently. This strategy is often effective for NES writers who can use their intuitive sense of the grammar and the flow of English to assess their own writing. This strategy may not work well for some ESL writers who have not developed that intuitive sense of the English language. For many ESL writers, reading their paper out loud may shift their attention to the pronunciation of the English language—an aspect of language proficiency separate from writing in English.

It may be more helpful for the ESL writer to hear the tutor read the paper out loud—to note when the reader stumbles, pauses, fills in missing articles and modifiers, or reads smoothly. The interpretation of meaning that takes place in the process of reading aloud "rhetorically with feeling and meaning" may also help the tutor identify where the writer's intended meaning is not clear to the tutor.[17] Yet, on the first reading, especially if the number of errors prevents the tutor from reading aloud without stumbling too often, it may be more effective for the tutor to read silently, focusing on sorting through meaning.

Sometimes less experienced readers of ESL texts get so overwhelmed by the sheer number of errors that they have to give up on the draft and stop

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

1. Matsuda (2002), 194–96.
2. Silva, 668.
3. Silva, 670.
4. CCCC Committee on Second Language Writing, 669–70.
5. Cumming, 81–141.
6. Matsuda (2008); Matsuda and Matsuda (2009).
7. CCCC Committee, 670.
8. Mohan and Lo (1985).
9. Severino (1993a), 47.
10. Severino (1993b), 187.
11. Severino (1993b), 189.
12. Severino (1993b), 194.
13. Leki, 132–33.
14. Severino (1993b), 187.
15. Santos, 81.
16. Santos, 81; Vann, Meyer, and Lorenz, 432.
17. Severino (1993b), 190.

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5

Avoiding Appropriation

Carol Severino

When I was studying Intermediate Italian in a study-abroad program in Italy, I wrote for our last assignment a brief essay "Un Viaggio a Venezia" about a trip to Venice I had taken some weeks before. In my simple syntax and vocabulary, I explained the theme of my mini-travel essay: Despite the fact that we travelers—four students, another professor, and I—had conflicting interests and itineraries, we managed to negotiate and compromise so that each person could do or see one thing she wanted to. We managed to shop for jewelry, masks, and shoes; feed the pigeons on St. Mark's Square; eat pizza by the Grand Canal; and watch the parade of boats in celebration of the Feast of the Redeemer. I was proud of my composition because I felt I had successfully communicated a complex travel experience in a foreign language I had studied for less than a year.

The day after I returned to the United States, I received a friendly email from my Italian teacher saying he had read and enjoyed my essay and had made just "a few corrections." When I opened the attachment and read my essay, I realized that not only had he taken the time to type directly in my handwritten essay, but he had in fact typed in a different essay—a more accurate and sophisticated one with vocabulary and verb tenses I did not know how to use yet. It was still more or less my experience in Venice, but now more in my teacher's language and my teacher's voice. For example, my original opening sentence had read, in translation:

> Trips to foreign cities are always a challenge, but when there are many travelers, the challenges become greater.

The revised sentence now read:

> Trips in foreign lands are always challenging, but when the travelers are many, the challenges multiply.

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 continue 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.[1] 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 reformation 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

interests the teachers instead of what interests the students. Then students are confused or demoralized by having to puzzle out their teachers' expectations and write to fulfill them instead of writing from their own impetus and intentions. Teachers appropriate or take over the texts of their students when they respond to their students' papers with their own ideal texts in mind instead of negotiating with the students about what the students' intentions are and how best to fulfill them.[2] Not only are students' texts removed from them by teachers, but more important, also their control over these texts. Issues of appropriation, therefore, are usually issues of control over composing and revising. Who has more control of the text—the writer or the teacher or tutor? We can probably say that the more control the tutor, teacher, or editor has over the writer's text, the greater is the likelihood of appropriation.

Control is also related to authority. Teachers take control of students' texts because they do not accord their students or their texts the authority they grant to canonical authors and their texts, according to Brannon and Knoblauch.[3] Rather than struggle to get meaning from opaque student texts as they would do with a William Faulkner or Dylan Thomas work, they assume control over those texts and over the writers themselves. Brannon and Knoblauch and others, such as Nancy Sommers[4] and Richard Straub,[5] have recommended that teachers relinquish some of their authority and control over the students' texts and return it to their students, thus empowering them. They recommend that teachers act as respondents, informing students of the effects of their intentions and words on them as readers. Most tutoring guides, such as those by Toni-Lee Capossela[6] and Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner,[7] also recommend that tutors not interfere with their students' control of their texts. They advocate the tutor roles of collaborator, facilitator, coach, and consultant rather than more teacherly, controlling, and directive roles of informant, editor, and evaluator.

Appropriation and Foreign and Second Language Writers

Well-meaning teachers and tutors can exert too much control over the topics, content, and development of their ESL students' papers, although the motivation for their assuming control may be different than it is with native speakers. The motivation to control may stem from disparity in cultural knowledge; either the tutor or student may have more cultural expertise, depending on the topic of the assignment. Sometimes the assignment situation seems to demand the tutor's directiveness. In our roles as cultural informants advocated by Judith Powers[8] and surrogate academic audience advocated by Joy Reid,[9] we tutors often know more about the assigned U.S. culture-bound topics of students' papers than our ESL students do, especially if they are international students who have lived for only a short time in the United States but must still write convincingly about U.S. culture, history, or controversies. Unless students can interpret and stretch their assignments to compare, for example, birth control and reproduction in China with those practices in the United States,

they may have no other choice but to use the tutor's background information or stance on these U.S. controversies. Sometimes it is only with the historical context and position provided by the tutor that the student can make sense of the material that he has gathered from researching the controversy. This kind of assignment-induced appropriation often cannot be avoided without more widespread changes; writing programs would have to allow ESL students a choice of controversies and/or provide courses with international or multicultural curricula such as those recommended by Paul Kei Matsuda and Tony Silva.[10]

Ironically, a kind of reverse cultural appropriation can also occur when the topics for writing are from the student's own culture. In composition and ESL classes and in writing centers such as ours in which ESL students do personal writing, well-meaning teachers and tutors often urge ESL students to write about (too) familiar topics, such as the Moon Festival or Chinese New Year, even when, as Ilona Leki points out, those topics might be considered stale, providing little opportunity to discover new ideas and personal meaning.[11] Call it the equivalent of "What I Did on My Summer Vacation."

Most commonly, the issue of appropriating L2 writing in general arises not in relation to control of topic or content but to control of language. Here the disparity is in linguistic knowledge, not cultural knowledge; the linguistic repertoire of a tutor who is a native speaker of the language is far greater than that of her students. My Italian teacher was much more likely to exert control over my Italian phrasing than he was to ask or require me to write on a trip to Florence or on an American holiday such as the Fourth of July. As a result of his elevating my style in the direction of his ideal text, some of my voice was sacrificed for increased vocabulary or, more precisely, passive vocabulary because I cannot guarantee I will use those new expressions correctly when I try them in different contexts in the future.

The Trade-Off Between Voice and Authentic Language

When I wrote my travel essay, I had been satisfied with sounding like an American English speaker and intermediate Italian learner in this foreign language situation; later, I felt that some of the language had been appropriated by my teacher and some of my voice had been lost. I had become accustomed to reading my personal writing in L1 or L2 in a possibly self-indulgent manner—as if I were looking in a mirror. Thus, as I read my work, I expected to see and hear myself, not someone else.

Yet my situation as a foreign language learner and writer is unquestionably different from an L2 situation with an L2 learner and writer. I was simply writing mini-travel essays, not studying in a degree program, taking rigorous humanities and social and natural sciences in Italian, and competing with Italian native speakers writing research papers, exams, and dissertations. The stakes are much higher for L2 learners, who are learning the target language of the country in which they are being educated, than they are for foreign language

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 gradations on a continuum of tutor and writer control and directiveness, as Straub recommends,[12] 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,"[13] 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.[14] (See also Canagarajah and Prior as cited by Tardy for other alternative, positive models of appropriation.)[15]

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 defendable 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.[16]

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,[17] and how, according to Virginia Collier, it takes at least seven years to acquire an academic vocabulary.[18] (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.[19]

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

> 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 Jia 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.

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.[23] 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

my courses and professors? When readers of reformulated essays compare them to the students' in-class writing and speaking, they may feel betrayed by both the students and the writing center (see Chapter 13). Bilingual tutor Olga Kulikova, an ESL teacher from Russia, sees other dangers in appropriation and misrepresentation—misleading readers into thinking that writers are more culturally assimilated into the host society than they actually are, in this case, making teachers expect "American" or "United Statesian" cultural behaviors:

> Absence of a foreign accent in writing can make professors or gatekeepers expect absence of a foreign accent in communicating; people who write properly should behave "properly." I do not want to seem more authentic than I am. It is not easy to learn to observe cultural rules, and I think it is much easier to excuse a grammar mistake than an unexpected cultural one.[27]

4. *Accord the ESL writer authority.* We are more likely to avoid appropriation if we accord ESL students authority as fluent, proficient speakers of and writers in their own native languages and advanced speakers and writers in English who may know more about the rules of English syntax, grammar, and usage than we do. When we compare their proficiency in English with ours in our L2, we can gain an appreciation and admiration for their amazing achievements. By respecting their authority as bilingual speakers and writers, as knowledgeable students of their disciplines, and as cultural informants about their own native languages and cultures, we are less likely to assume control of their texts and impose our ideal ones.
5. *Work on higher-order concerns before lower-order concerns.* We are more likely to avoid appropriating language and voice if we adhere to the principle of higher-order concerns versus lower-order concerns recommended by Donald McAndrew and Thomas Reigstad.[28] The assignment, focus, argument, development, and organization are usually more important than expression unless some language clarifications and corrections are needed simply to understand whether the student has followed the assignment and to understand her points. In the case of language completely obscuring argument, the level of language would be considered a higher-order and global concern. Otherwise, there is no point in working carefully and slowly to reformulate language that should not or probably will not appear in the next draft because the student needs to refocus or revise her entire argument.
6. *Select particular passages to work on.* We are more likely to avoid appropriation if we prioritize and select passages from a student's writing to revise. Because there may not be time in one tutoring session and because it could be cognitively overwhelming for both tutor and student to reformulate all nonnative constructions, a few should be chosen, particularly

- global problems that interfere with meaning, as Muriel Harris and Tony Silva recommend[29] (see also Chapters 6 and 7)
- nonidiomatic passages about which the student expresses concern
- features that are ungrammatical rather than just nonidiomatic.

7. *Use speaking-into-writing strategies.* We are more likely to avoid appropriation if we use speaking-into-writing techniques that use the student's direct spoken language. This helps capture and preserve his voice. Marilyn Abildskov, a former University of Iowa tutor and now a creative writing professor at St. Mary's College, says that "Tell me more" is the best question tutors can ask to elicit both participation and content for writing and to reflect the writer's voice.[30] Tell-me-more questions about expression cause the student to clarify her intended meaning and often result in language that is clearer and more idiomatic than what is on the page. Working from reading aloud and from speaking in order to rephrase written passages is what ex-tutor John Winzenburg, now a music professor at Agnes Scott College, calls the "outside-in approach." In contrast, "the inside-out approach," he says, is when the ESL writer is concentrating on how she thinks she should write rather than on what she is trying to say.[31] By having the student verbalize and converse to find and revise written language, ex-tutor Jennifer Ryan, now teaching at Buffalo State College, says she ensures that the voice on the page is not an English voice or, for example, a Chinese voice but the student's voice.[32]
8. *Explain the recommended changes.* We are more likely to avoid appropriation if we offer brief explanations for why the student's passage is faulty and why our recommended changes are better, rather than just writing or typing them on the page. If the feature is based on a rule and the tutor can explain the rule, then this provides an opportunity for learning and carries over to the next writing rather than just repairing that one expression. For example, I would tell Satomi that the words "own _____" are preceded by a possessive adjective: *my own car, one's own name*. Why this word or expression and not that? Why should we say two chemicals "competed" with another to bond with a third chemical rather than "contended" with one another? Look up both words in the dictionary together to learn the connotations and contexts. Why this verb form and not another? Why a gerund rather than an infinitive in the second reformulation of Satomi's sentence? The changed construction has fewer words, is more economical and streamlined, and is easier to process, even though the infinitive in the original sentence was not ungrammatical. If a tutor doesn't know the explanation, then rather than invent one, it is best to look it up together in a grammar book or ask the tutors sitting next to you. We don't have to have an explanation for every change we suggest; indeed, students may not want or need them, and there may not be enough

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.[33]

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

1. Cohen (1985); Swain and Lapkin (2002); Qi and Lapkin (2001).
2. Brannon and Knoblauch (1998).
3. Brannon and Knoblauch, 213.
4. Sommers (1982).
5. Straub (1996).
6. Caposella (1998).
7. Gillespie and Lerner (2003).
8. Powers, (1993).
9. Reid, 273–92.
10. Matsuda and Silva (1999).
11. Leki (1992).
12. Straub, 225.
13. Reid, 290.
14. Tardy (2006).
15. Canagarajah (2002); Prior (1998).
16. Kathy Lyons, personal communication.
17. CCCC Statement on Second Language Writers.
18. Collier (1987).
19. Severino, 190.
20. Yiyun Li, personal communication.
21. Carmen Mota, personal communication.
22. Jia Zhu, personal communication.
23. Ritter, 104.
24. Wingate, 9.
25. LuAnn Dvorak, personal communication.
26. Megan Knight, personal communication.
27. Olga Kulikova, personal communication.
28. McAndrew and Reigstad, 42.
29. Harris and Silva (1993).

30. Marilyn Abildskov, personal communication.
31. John Winzenburg, personal communication.
32. Jennifer Ryan, personal communication.
33. Kai Lin Wu, personal communication.

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7

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.[1] 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."[2] 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.

Some Background

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."[3] 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.[4]

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 often is 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.[5] 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.[6]

Contrastive rhetoric studies suggest that "not simply rhetorical style but also purpose, task, topic, and audience are culturally informed."[7] Therefore, ESL writers may need resources—"cultural informants"—to help them understand the assumptions and expectations of a U.S. academic audience, assumptions that are not usually directly addressed on the assignment sheet.

The role of informant is an important one for writing center work. It is, in many respects, an extension of the facilitator role where tutors question the students about their texts, the needs of the audience, and how the text might change to meet these needs. As a facilitator, tutors can use these Socratic questioning techniques to elicit knowledge from the writer that the writer may in turn incorporate into the text. Open-ended questions about everything from audience to word choice can push writers to think about and use what they already know. However, for many ESL students as well as inexperienced NES writers, these same techniques may be doomed to fail because no amount of questioning, no matter how clearly and effectively the tutor words it, can elicit language or cultural knowledge the writer doesn't possess. These writers need the tutor to act as informant to provide them with the background they need to successfully negotiate these new writing contexts.

Yet, even the experts don't agree on what tutors should focus on when they take on an informant role. For instance, Susan Blau and John Hall believe that interweaving discussions of language and vocabulary throughout a tutoring session may be more appropriate with ESL writers, particularly those with less experience writing in English.[8] On the other hand, Carol Severino,[9] as well as Muriel Harris and Tony Silva,[10] maintain that higher-order, rhetorical concerns should still come before linguistic concerns. Similarly, many tutor guidebooks, such as *The Longman Guide to Peer Tutoring*, encourage writers to continue to put higher-order concerns first when working with second language writers.[11]

Acting as a cultural informant about U.S. academic expectations—rhetorical or otherwise—and focusing the writer's attention on the text as a whole is vital precisely because no matter what the background of the ESL writer, language can be an overwhelming and blinding concern. Some ESL students have spent time in high school or middle school in the United States. These students may seem to be familiar with aspects of American culture and language, everything from customs to idioms, but they often lack knowledge of U.S. academic culture, just like any inexperienced writer. Because English is not their first language, students may assume that good writing is the same as correct writing.

At the same time, other ESL students may become overwhelmed while trying to write because of the cognitive complexity of the task.[12] These are the students who often cannot see the forest for the trees: They are so focused on the language—on trying to wrestle their complicated thoughts onto paper using language abilities that are not yet sufficient to the task—that they may not realize that the change in language and in culture necessitates a different approach to communicating those thoughts to others. For both sets of students, language concerns can overshadow rhetorical ones, and important conversations about academic culture and expectations may not take place. This is why it can be important to focus on the text as a whole.

What to Do

Tutoring sessions are as individual as fingerprints: They may progress along a familiar pattern only to whorl suddenly off into new and unexpected directions. Therefore, we don't have specific procedures for you to follow, but instead we offer a series of principles and strategies that may help you and your tutee to think and talk about the text in front of you, not just as a series of grammatical constructions but as a complex and rhetorical whole.

Talk Before Text

One of the strengths of writing center conferences has always been the interactive talk between tutor and tutee. Although questions may not work in the same way with ESL writers as they do when working with NES students, we would argue that they can still play a critical role in the writing center conference. One of the ways to incorporate questioning into conferences with ESL students is to talk with the writer *before* turning your attention to the text.

- One way to get the conversation started is to focus first on the assignment. Most tutors have had the experience of discovering at the end of the session that a student had completely misinterpreted the instructor's directions. Oftentimes, this misinterpretation is caused by cultural differences. We forget that the writing assignment itself is cultural; although students might understand the individual words, they still may not have a clear idea of what the instructor expects. Read the assignment. Ask the writer questions about his understanding of the expectations of the assignment and how he tried to meet them. Telling students that they are on the wrong track can be difficult. However, it is even more difficult to tell a student that fact after you've spent forty minutes helping him generate and develop ideas that don't adequately address the assignment.
- Another way to start a conversation before turning to the text is to ask ESL writers what they chose to write about in response to the assignment and why they chose it as the subject for their papers. The simple request "Tell me what your paper is about" can be useful when working with any ESL writer, but it is especially productive when working with students who are inexperienced writers in both English and their native language. These discussions can help both of you notice differences between what the writer has told you and what is on the page—differences you and the writer can negotiate together.

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

information you have at the time. You must trust the student's knowledge of his own needs and priorities. And ultimately, you must trust in the validity of the ultimate goal of the kind of writing center that Stephen North describes—a place for the "creation of a continuous dialectic that is, finally, its own end."[14] Sometimes this requires a pragmatic approach. You may need to cut a deal now to lure the students back later, so the conversation can continue and the real growth can begin.

One final note: Tutors need to be engaged in another type of conversation as well, and that is the one that all professionals have with the research in their field. We offer some suggestions for further readings we think you will find helpful and interesting:

Ilona Leki, "Twenty-Five Years of Contrastive Rhetoric: Text Analysis and Writing Pedagogies," *TESOL Quarterly* 25(1) (1991): 123–43. In this article, Leki gives a useful overview of the various strands of contrastive rhetoric research and discusses a number of ways that contrastive rhetoric can and should influence writing instruction.

Wayne Robertson, *Writing Across Borders*, DVD (Corvallis: Oregon State University, 2005). In this DVD, theoretical issues of contrastive rhetoric are brought to life as international students and several scholars discuss the cultural and linguistic challenges second language writers face when writing for U.S. academic audiences.

Ruth Spack,"The Acquisition of Academic Literacy in a Second Language: A Longitudinal Case Study," *Written Communication* 14(1) (1997): 3–62. In this research study, Spack follows Yuko, an undergraduate international student from Japan, over the course of three years and explores how Yuko develops academic literacy in English. Spack's research not only highlights the complexities involved in this undertaking but also suggests ways that teachers and tutors can assist international students as they negotiate this process.

Amy Tucker, *Decoding ESL: International Students in the American College Classroom* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1995). In this book, Tucker examines how the cultures and cultural rhetorics of both students and teachers influence what happens in the college writing classroom. She demonstrates through multiple examples the need for teachers to learn to "read" and "reread" their students, an idea that is equally important for tutors.

If your writing center does not already have a professional library for tutors, these readings and others cited in this book would make a great start. They will draw you into a conversation you will want to continue for a long time.

Notes

1. Gillespie and Lerner (2008).
2. North, 73.
3. Harris and Silva, 526.
4. Bruffee, 95.
5. Fox (1994).
6. Shen (1989).
7. Leki (1991), 133.
8. Blau and Hall, 23–44.
9. Severino, IV2.3.
10. Harris and Silva, 531.
11. Gillespie and Lerner, 126.
12. Leki (1992), 107.
13. Harris and Silva, 529.
14. North, 83.

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8

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,