The Elements of Teaching Writing
A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines

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deeds, he accuses them of concealing their misdeeds even from themselves.

For a much more thorough discussion of how to analyze sentences, consult a book such as those by Williams and Lanham. Any writer’s reference will provide helpful information and examples on such matters as subordination, coordination, and parallelism, areas in which students can often benefit from developmental exercises.

Responding to the Sentence-Level Problems of ESL Students

Students for whom English is a second language (ESL students) may make sentence-level errors and have difficulties that differ from those of native speakers. You may therefore want to respond somewhat differently to the essays of ESL students and provide different kinds of assistance. As with native speakers, you may find, however, that the response to your assistance is slower than you would wish. Learning takes time, usually more than you will get to spend with these students. From our colleague Judith Pierpont, a specialist in helping ESL students with their writing, we have learned the value of the following practices.

• **Provide additional time and practice.** For the most part, non-native speakers of English will benefit from the same kinds of assistance that you provide native speakers. Nonnative speakers may, however, need extended deadlines, additional drafts, and more opportunities to edit. You may have to decide whether you want to see only correct work from ESL students, with an accompanying decrease in richness of thought, or if you want to encourage depth of thought and elicit correctness later.

• **Discuss the most appropriate kinds of response to students’ essays.** When responding to the writing of ESL students, it can be helpful to consult with students about what type of response, in terms of sentence correctness, they consider to be most helpful. Do they need to have you actually make the changes (for example, insert or delete articles in the writing of Asian language speakers)? Do they prefer that you underline errors so they can figure out what’s wrong on their own? Do they require only that you put an X in the margin, leaving the search for the error up to them?

  Your ESL students will be at different stages of expertise, and the method should be chosen to suit their abilities. Many ESL student writers will know the “rules” better than you do, but (as with native speakers) you can help them by identifying patterns of error and then giving them opportunities to make the needed corrections and practice correct patterns.

  We might note that, even more than with native speakers, it would be unfair to judge the worth of an essay in terms only, or primarily, of its sentence correctness. Let ESL student writers know — and demonstrate to them — that you are interested in what they have to say, not just (at the sentence level) how they say it.

• **Help ESL students learn how to take charge of correctness on their own.** As with native speakers, you can encourage ESL students to take charge of correctness on their own, by any devices available to them, whether those include getting able roommates, friends, or members of their families to review the final drafts or consulting tutors at your institution’s writing center. You can certainly encourage ESL students to take advantage of the tutorial service offered by your school. If you are actively working with these students on ESL issues, however, make sure that they tell you the kinds of assistance they have received, and when you want to know what they can do on their own, tell them not to get help from others.

• **Seek outside assistance.** Many colleges and universities employ one or more specialists in the teaching of ESL students. If you find that you have a number of such students in your classes, you might benefit from consulting with these specialists to make sure that you are neither shortchanging your students nor overburdening yourself with unneeded or unhelpful efforts. Some institutions are able to provide additional assistance for ESL students beyond what you can give.

Do not be surprised if you fail to eradicate all error from your students’ writing or to transform their writing styles: getting rid of old habits may not happen in the semester that students spend with you, no matter how insistent you are, but other teachers may reap the fruits of your instruction. And also, do you recall all those mistakes and infelicities you’ve found in your own supposedly thoroughly proofed manuscripts?