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Understanding ESL Writers: Second Language Writing by Composition Instructors

> Sarah J. Shin

Composition teachers can obtain a better understanding of the challenges facing ESL students by writing in their own second language and reflecting on the experience.

As a doctoral student, I taught an academic writing course for college ESL students. The fifteen students in my class came from a number of different first language backgrounds and disciplines of study. One of my students, Ming Na, an art major from Taiwan, was an especially shy and soft-spoken student. She was one of my weaker students—she often turned in assignments that didn't follow the directions. My suspicion that Ming Na's problems in English went beyond just writing was confirmed when she turned in a third draft of her essay comparing and contrasting the educational systems in Taiwan and the United States. We had already conferred twice about this paper and I expected to see some major improvement in her third draft. In spite of this, her revision was still plagued by too many distracting grammatical errors and vague expressions, and I suspected that she might have poor listening skills and therefore needed to see my comments written more explicitly.

When we met for the third time, I corrected her essay from the beginning, one sentence at a time, crossing out and rewriting entire phrases in some cases. By

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the time I was through the whole paper, it was completely filled with my handwriting in the text and in the margins, with arrows going in different directions. When I returned the paper to her and told her to revise it once more, Ming Na looked simply overwhelmed, clutched her paper, thanked me, and ran out of my office crying. I sat at my desk

wondering what had gone wrong, because I thought I was doing her a favor by giving her a detailed commentary. When I called Ming Na at home that night, she told me she felt as if she would never be able to write well in English. She said she was simply afraid to write in English for fear of making "mistakes." She had spent a

great deal of time on her revisions, yet her attempts at fixing problems seemed to create even more problems. To Ming Na, my rather heavy-handed corrections only meant that her writing just wasn't good enough, no matter how much effort and time she devoted to improving it. I felt terrible. I don't think Ming Na ever recovered from this experience, at least not in my class. I tried to help but I didn't know any better.

It has been seven years since this incident and I now am teaching ESL and foreign language teachers and teacher candidates how to teach second language writing. I have since learned a great deal more about second language writing processes and know what I should have done with Ming Na. For one, I should have kept my corrections to a minimum and prioritized among errors. At the end of each conference, I should have made her write down steps for revising her paper so that she would know exactly what to do at home. Instead of simply correcting her mechanical errors, I should have helped her identify and correct her own mistakes by way of grammar minilessons. I should have modeled expected organizational patterns by showing her concrete examples rather than simply telling her that her sentences and paragraphs needed to be reorganized. Perhaps most important, however, I should have been more encouraging of her genuine attempts to improve her writing in English.

However, all of this is easier said than done, especially for instructors who haven't had adequate training in dealing specifically with ESL writing. The glaring structural deficiencies characteristic of many ESL compositions make it difficult for well-meaning but less trained teachers to resist the temptation to correct every error. As I thought about why many teachers find it difficult to withstand the pressure to correct every error in ESL writing, I came to realize that part of the difficulty stems from considering the native English speaker's writing as a standard against which ESL writing is measured. As a result, ESL writing almost always falls short. It's easier to characterize ESL writing with the deficiencies—the unfamiliar grammatical errors and extraordinarily different rhetorical patterns—than with the quality of the content. Without a genuine understanding of what it's like to write in one's second language, composition teachers are likely to be dismayed by these “irregularities” and place an undue burden on ESL students to produce native-like papers. But if writing instructors become second language writers themselves, they may be able to better understand that making mistakes is a natural part of language acquisition and that the best way to teach writing to ESL students is through focusing on a few errors with explanations that students are ready for.

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Fluency before Accuracy

A number of studies have shown the importance of providing instructor feedback that decreases writing anxiety and increases student confidence. Loretta Frances Kasper reports success when she moved from correcting virtually all errors in her ESL student writing to simply identifying those errors and requiring that the students themselves correct them. She discusses the importance of focusing on fluency before grammatical accuracy in ESL student writing through a nonjudgmental instructional approach, which helps ESL students attain fluency and clarity of expression in a process- rather than product-oriented environment (59). In this student-centered approach, mechanical accuracy is not the means to achieving fluency and clarity of expression but a result of having worked to express ideas most fluently and clearly. In another study, Adele MacGowan-Gilhooly demonstrated that when the ESL writing course focused on producing grammatical accuracy for the purpose of preparing students to pass a college writing assessment test, they did not progress as well, and some actually regressed from former performance levels.

Some ESL writers are eager to get every error corrected in a paper, especially when they are writing papers for other courses where they think the paper should be “correct” (Harris and Silva 531). Evidence from second language writing research,

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however, suggests that even the most intensive, systematic attention to grammatical errors produces insignificant improvement in subsequent writing tasks (Robb, Ross, and Shortreed). According to Harris and Silva, ESL students benefit most from a more limited approach to feedback in which teachers address only some aspects of content and form in each

paper, starting with content and organization, then grammar (532). Once the content more or less expresses what the student is trying to say, feedback on grammar can refine revisions. However, if students are misusing structures that will clearly recur in a particular piece of writing, it makes sense to make limited grammar corrections earlier so that these can be incorporated into subsequent revisions (Leki 128).

A Language Learning Experience Approach

Given this backdrop, how can writing instructors develop sensitivity toward the writing processes of ESL students? The idea of engaging prospective language teachers in a reflective language learning experience as part of teacher preparation programs is not new (Flowerdew; Lowe; Waters et al.). Flowerdew provides an account of the value of reflection in the Language Learning Experience (LLE) course, which is part of the three-year full-time B.A. TESL program at the City University of Hong Kong (530). Participants study a language other than Cantonese (their first language) and English for two hours per week and participate in eight one-hour

reflection sessions, spread over the semester. Participants keep a written diary during their LLE and do an extended reflection on the whole LLE course for their final entry. The LLE course provides participants with an opportunity to reflect on language teaching from the perspective of the learners whom they will teach when they themselves become language teachers. By experiencing the problems that their future students will have in learning a second language, the participants are able to develop what Wallace calls “experiential knowledge,” which is gained from practical experience.

Adapting the Language Learning Experience approach, I require the teacher candidates in my writing methods course to do a mini language learning experience activity toward the beginning of each semester. I ask the teachers to write in their second languages about the most memorable trip they have ever taken. They are to describe where they went, what they did there, and what made the trip unforgettable. I like to assign this topic because I’ve found that people usually have a lot to say (and write) about an enjoyable experience. This is a free-writing exercise, in which the teachers write continually for twenty minutes without worrying about errors. Based on this in-class writing exercise, the teachers then write for homework a two-to-three-page self-evaluative piece in English about their experiences in writing in a second language. They are asked to think back to their previous second language writing experiences, describing particularly positive or negative experiences. They are also asked to discuss the implications of their experiences for teaching ESL writing and to think about how they would respond to structural and organizational errors.

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About 30 percent of the methods course participants are international students and are themselves second language learners of English. Although most of these teachers have been studying English for many years and have taught English as a foreign language in their home countries, many of them feel insecure about their writing in English. The rest of the participants are native English speakers who have had foreign language instruction in languages such as French and Spanish in secondary school and/or college but for the most part do not use their second languages at present. Some native English speakers who have had overseas living and working experience have had exposure to some non-European languages as well but have had very limited experience in writing in those languages. In general, writing in one’s second language seems to be a difficult experience regardless of how similar or different the writer’s two languages are, as one Portuguese speaker used the term “dreadful” and a Korean speaker used the term “frustrating” to describe their experiences in writing in English as a second language. Some of these sentiments are clearly communicated in the excerpts from the teachers’ self-evaluative pieces shown in the following section.

Second Language Teachers Reflect on Their Writing Experience

Extracts from the teachers' self-evaluative pieces indeed provide striking evidence of how the teachers were able to develop a better understanding of ESL writers. For example, the following extract highlights the value of teachers' experiencing students' frustration in writing in a second language:

For the first time in years, I felt the pressure of writing in a second language in the classroom. I enjoy writing letters to my pen pals, but having a teacher assign me a particular topic to write about was much more intimidating. As a teacher, I think it is important to have at least some awareness of what it feels like to write in a second language. Having done this activity, I am more keenly aware of the discomfort and frustration of writing in a second language.

Another teacher likens the experience of writing in a second language to that of being a person with a disability:

The experience of writing in a second language in which you are not totally competent must be similar to the experience of being a person with a physical disability that affects communication. The thought processes are intact; the will to communicate is functioning. But the richness of thought experienced internally can't be expressed through the medium available. [...] It is easy to feel somewhat inferior to others who are not experiencing the same limitation, and [...] those who experience physical limitations to communication or inadequate majority language skills often encounter the attitude, subtly conveyed by those around them who have no experience with what they are dealing with, that they are probably stupid.

In addition, the teachers' self-evaluative pieces reveal that most of their successful experiences in writing in a second language were in settings where they were able to focus on developing their fluency and clarity of expression without having to concern themselves excessively with grammatical accuracy. In the following, a Korean-speaking ESL teacher describes a particularly successful experience with relay writing in English through which her instructor encouraged her to express her ideas and take risks in crafting her language:

I once attended a language school for two months in Canada. At that time, our class was doing so-called relay writing, where everyone in class took turns to make a story after one another. It lasted for one and a half months, and we finally made a wonderful mysterious story. We even published the story. Since it was a creative work, not much affected by rules, everyone enjoyed the process. We, in fact, were waiting for the writing class because we were so curious what kind of story other classmates created! I also remember that the writing teacher was very encouraging, and I also got a lot of supportive feedback from her. She said I was very creative and knew how to write and how to lead a story in an intriguing way. My work was sometimes introduced in front of my classmates. I felt I was a good writer in a second language. However, I have not felt that way after the course. Thinking back to those days, the creative work basically helped me enjoy writing. At that time, I did not worry about form much, and it did make me

express myself freely. Furthermore, the work was done by everyone, so my classmates stimulated one another to do a better job.

In contrast, many of the negative second language writing experiences described by the teachers were in settings where their writing was evaluated mainly for grammatical correctness. Another Korean-speaking ESL teacher writes:

My joy in writing in English turned out to be a little fearful when I attended a course for IELTS exam. Students in the course were supposed to receive an intensive training how to write an essay to get a high score on the exam. The teacher was very knowledgeable and intelligent. However, he was strict and mean in grading our papers. He did not appreciate my wordy, verbal, and complicated essays. I could not figure out how to express my ideas in a clear and academic way in English. I started losing interest in my writing in English. It was disappointing to see my paper filled with criticism and a slightly lower score. What was worse, however, was that I had no idea how to improve it.

This extract supports the claims of MacGowan-Gilhooly and Kasper that writing for evaluation can inhibit students' progress. When the focus of writing is on producing correct language, ESL writers concentrate on their perceived faults, and cannot freely express their ideas. However, when the focus shifts from structural accuracy to fluency and clear expression of ideas, students are more likely to enjoy writing in English and develop their strengths as writers. A native-English-speaking teacher of Spanish aptly summarizes her realization of this knowledge in the following extract:

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I suppose I have tended to feel that if I am a Spanish teacher, I should not make mistakes when writing in Spanish. Since, of course, I did make mistakes, I never felt successful. If the goal, however, becomes to communicate, rather than to write without errors, the focus shifts. I am beginning to understand a paradigm for L2 learning that allows for success all along the way, before perfection is achieved.

In her end-of-the-semester evaluation, this same teacher describes how her goal as a language teacher has changed as a result of the course and states that she has decided to implement a fluency- rather than accuracy-driven approach to teaching writing:

I have just collected a writing assignment from each of my Spanish classes. I am certain, from experience, that they are full of very basic errors. In the past, my goal would have been to correct the papers so that they have an error-free draft. Now, however, I will put additional thought into what I hope for the students to gain from the writing exercises, teach to some common errors, and have them

take more responsibility to decide what is wrong with the errors circled. I feel much better prepared for this task today than I did in January.

When asked to select and highlight three important pieces of writing they did for the course, many teachers chose to discuss this exercise as having fundamentally changed the way they think about and teach ESL writing. In the following, a native-English-speaking teacher of French describes a change in her attitude toward student writing errors and highlights the value of a fluency-driven approach:

I really enjoyed writing this piece, as I do not often get asked to comment on my experiences as a foreign language writer. Having to translate those experiences to paper really made me think about how I go about writing in French or Spanish and what strategies and tools I apply to make my writing better. I also really had to think about how those strategies compare to the ones I use when writing in my native language of English. It was interesting to see what experiences from my past stood out as being particularly important or influential. The moments which stayed with me highlighted both good and bad experiences and I noticed that I, in turn, have translated those experiences into a sense of what “to do” as a foreign language teacher and what “not to do.” [...] However, as a result of subsequent class discussions, I would like to try and respond more to the content of student writing rather than only commenting on grammar or vocabulary mistakes. I have begun to do this since taking this class and have been pleased to see students really reading my comments and enjoying trying to figure out what I was saying to them. Many times we have had further conversation based on my replies.

Conclusion

As the number of ESL students enrolled in two-year colleges increases steadily nationwide (Kasper), more and more composition instructors are faced with the challenge of providing meaningful instruction to second language writers. This challenge is perhaps most acutely felt in colleges where ESL students are mainstreamed into developmental English courses with instructors who have little

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or no formal training in how to deal with the problems unique to ESL students. I suggest that composition teachers who have ESL students in their classes do what my teacher candidates did—write in their own second languages and subsequently reflect on the experience. By reflecting on these writing experiences, composition instructors can evaluate how they themselves write other lan-

guages, develop more realistic expectations about improving student writing, and obtain a better understanding of the benefits of a fluency-driven, process-based approach to teaching writing. As a result, composition instructors can develop their skills not only as writing teachers, but also as learners, capable of empathizing with the particular needs of ESL students.

Note

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