

ESL Concerns for Writing Program Administrators: Problems and Policies

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Demographers predict for the coming decade an increase in nonnative populations in those areas where there is already a concentration of new immigrants and permanent residents and the possible influx of such populations to other areas as well. Further, there are approximately 400,000 traditional foreign students in U.S. colleges and universities, and this number is not expected to diminish (Zikopoulos, *Open Doors*). All types of post-secondary institutions—whether state or private, large or small, first-tier or second-tier or community college—will need to respond to this challenge.

However, two recent publications on writing programs, Connolly and Vilardi's *New Methods in College Writing Programs* and Hartzog's *Composition and the Academy*, give little attention to second-language writers, although they make important contributions to our knowledge in many areas of writing program administration. Together, the two books cover a total of 64 schools. In Connolly and Vilardi, only 4 schools mention English as a Second Language (ESL) in their program descriptions, and very briefly. In Hartzog, where more focused information is gathered, ESL appears in two tables. One shows that 18 of the 41 schools examined have some kind of ESL course or treatment. The other shows that, among the various categories and units that a writing program serves (freshmen, sophomores, upper division, honors students, EOP students, the university as a whole, other departments, and so on), writing program administrators rated the success of their service to second language writers "Poor" and, in fact, the lowest of all (*Composition* 33, 56).

In administering a writing program that accommodates both first- and second-language speakers, WPAs must consider several questions. The answers to these questions affect the kind and quality of writing instruction available for second language writers, and, by extension, the quality of education of future citizens. There are many questions; but then, the impact is not small.

Among the most salient questions are those concerned with whether or not nonnative writers are viewed and treated as part of a unified writing program, one that is theoretically motivated and research-based. Are second-language students taught writing with native English-

speaking students or separately? How should they be taught? If separately, are there whole separate courses, or separate sections of the same course? And, if separately, who controls (or influences) content and method in the ESL sections or courses? Who supervises the teaching staff? What are the criteria for hiring instructors for those sections or courses? Are those criteria the same or different from those for staffing native-speaker courses?

Methods and theoretical assumptions behind testing also interact with treatment of nonnative speakers of English as a separate entity or as one part of a pluralistic whole. How is competence determined for freshman writing? For upper division or graduation writing proficiency? How are second-language writers evaluated?

In attending to the issues raised by these questions, we have to consider types of ESL students, theories which underlie programs and courses along with faculty assumptions about language acquisition and the development of literacy, program structures and goals, types of teachers, and problems of assessment.

Types of Students

Writing programs may have to serve three main types of second-language students—traditional foreign students, recent immigrants, and bilingual students. Traditional foreign students—now generally called “international students”—are those who come to the U.S. for the express purpose of college study and whose intention, at least nominally, is to return to their native country. They are sometimes sent by their government to acquire some professional education needed by the country. Otherwise, they are sent by families who are well-to-do. A certain elitism accrues to the teaching of these students, in comparison with immigrants or bilingual speakers: while differing linguistically and culturally from “us,” they share a class membership which upwardly mobile students are only striving to enter and which many faculty members feel at ease with. They are usually well-educated in their native culture. Their English language training has been mainly grammar-based, and they often display a high degree of anxiety for correctness.

There is predictably a greater range of education and attitude toward education among recent immigrants or permanent residents. These students may have a strong cultural tradition for the value of education, or they may not; they may have been educated in the home language or they may not be literate in their first language (see Heath, “Sociocultural”). Depending on their age of arrival and length of time in the U.S., such students may have good oral, communicative skills which may not be balanced by comparable competence in English literacy.

Bilingual speakers are often considered, and treated, separately from either of the other two groups of nonnative speakers. They are sometimes the same population as “Basic Writers,” since because of areas of residence and linguistic power relationships in those areas, bilingual students may very possibly speak a nonstandard dialect. Another group of bilingual students, however, are those born and raised in other countries but educated in standard English.

Despite differences in linguistic origin, type of education, and degree of competence in English, for all these types of speakers of English, the experience, or lack of it, in using literacy to negotiate education may be—in large—quite similar to each other’s, and similar to that of many native English-speaking students. This similarity lies in a reification of text as opposed to what Bartholomae and Petrosky describe as a relationship with texts in which a reader makes meaning rather than finds it (*Facts*, 11-17). That is, while international students and traditionally educated native English-speaking students may have learned that they *can* memorize, and basic reading and writing students may have learned that they *can’t* memorize, both groups are likely to approach reading and writing with the assumption of the text as a given and the reader’s job, to receive it.

Theories

Programmatic and staffing decisions rest on theories about the development of literacy and language acquisition, whether these theories are articulated or not. Currently, theories of second-language acquisition and composition, or more generally, of literacy development, are reassuringly and satisfyingly similar, as indeed they should be since both entail the development of the individual in society through language, and the concomitant development of language through social interaction.

People who studied foreign languages in school are likely to have studied in one of two ways—*grammar-translation*, with an emphasis on grammar and on reading as decoding, or *audio-lingual*, with an emphasis on speaking correctly, phonologically and grammatically, that is, sounding like a native speaker. Both approaches had a grammar-based syllabus. Both were error-centered and both rested on practice as a means of eliminating error. The *audio-lingual* approach had the added goal of protecting against error, with memorized dialogues, substitution drills, and pattern practices. In the past two decades, a major change has occurred. Research has focused on the learner and the process of acquiring language, both first and second. While scholars in the field of language acquisition differ on the explanatory validity of concepts such as Krashen’s “learning vs acquisition,” no one doubts that rote practice is

not enough—mere rote drill does not a speaker make (Gregg, "Input"; Harste, *Language*, Ch. 5). Error is seen as a sign of growth and communication is seen as highly context-dependent, growing out of a speaker's needs and purposes and shaped according to the speaker's understanding of the hearer, or audience. The goal of language instruction is not to try to correct all errors nor to try to drill to perfection, but to enable the learner to develop strategies whereby she can continue to learn rather than fostering dependence upon a controlling teacher.

Stephen North has suggested in *The Making of Knowledge in Composition* that in the field of composition we perhaps cannot validly speak of paradigm shifts to characterize changes in our sense of how writing develops and how it may best, or well, be taught. Nevertheless, we can, I think, speak with some certainty about a communal sense of the developmental nature of literacy, and of the interdependence of purpose, audience, and context. We do not encourage correcting all the errors, focusing on grammar out of context, or writing to rigid structural modes or models; we think of writing as a way of learning, of making meaning, and of participating in a community. Thus there is a core of similarity in theory and in instructional models in the two fields.

Types of Teachers

If teaching writing is hard work, then certainly teaching writing to nonnative speakers is hard, and that difficulty brings with it perplexity: how to help? There is a tendency among administrators and English Department faculties to look for linguists and ESL specialists to "deal with" second language writers. However, this reliance may be based on a misapprehension about the knowledge and training which many such professionals receive and therefore about their relationship to literacy research and to the generation of texts.

Linguists, while they are likely to understand language systems in general and English in particular, may be specialists in paleolinguistics or abstract syntax, for example, and may have not training in language acquisition or sociolinguistics at all, let alone in rhetoric and writing. An understanding of the recursive generativity of grammar does not automatically transfer to the recursive nature of writing processes. ESL specialists, on the other hand, are trained mainly in oral communication. Reading-training, while it has gone beyond mere decoding, is quite structure-oriented, and there is as yet not much training in teaching writing, unless the graduate program is linked with a graduate composition-teaching program, including course work in rhetoric and composition and supervision of TAs in composition-teaching. There are a few such graduate programs, but they are rare. The advantages that ESL

specialists usually do have is an appreciation for cultural diversity and an understanding of, and therefore comfort with, the processes and stages of language acquisition. They may also be knowledgeable in contrastive rhetoric and thus may be better able to identify and understand rhetorical diversity as well.¹ However, people from the disciplines of linguistics and TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language), when coming in to the teaching of composition in college, may just as likely fall back to a modes-centered, grammar-based approach as those who come straight out of literature studies, unless there is either a self-conscious commitment to individual professional development or intervention at a programmatic level, with in-service workshops and articulated statements of theory and approach.

Research is pointing more and more forcefully to the similarities between the processes of first and second language acquisition and similarities between the processes of language acquisition and the development of literacy. Yet even when practitioners in each field are current with the theoretical and research agendas in their field, it is often the case that when each group of teachers is confronted with the other group of students, such knowledge goes out the window. Instructors of composition who teach process and audience awareness to native speakers of English, when they find themselves in classrooms with second-language speakers, may tend to look for workbooks with drills on articles and fill-in models for the five-paragraph essay. Similarly, instructors of English as a second language who normally focus on communicative competence based on assessment of situation, audience and goal, when they find themselves teaching writing, may tend to look for ways to guide and control the writing of second-language speakers so as to minimize or protect against the production of error.

Specialists, then, in linguistics, or language acquisition, or other fields such as reading, for example, may indeed be able to contribute their special knowledge to a writing program serving second language writers, but the current strong claim that writing teachers need to know writing from the inside out is as important for teachers of second language students as it is for teachers of native speakers.

Types of Programs and Types of Courses

By types of programs I mean the distribution of population, that is, whether native and nonnative speakers of English are in composition classes together or whether separate programs are mounted to address each population. Separate programs may be established either because the actual *needs* of those populations are perceived to be different, or because the *means* to satisfying college literacy goals are seen as different

for native and nonnative speakers. If the programs and populations are separate, the native-speaker program is usually larger than the nonnative-speaker program. However, in some urban areas where there is now a "majority-minority" population, the nonnative may outnumber the native speaker population. In some cases, the WPA is responsible for both native-speaker and nonnative-speaker programs (Appendix, Figure 1a), with perhaps a coordinator organizing and supervising the nonnative speaker side; sometimes, however, the two are quite separate administratively (Appendix, Figure 1b). Some programs do not separate native and nonnative English speaking populations (Appendix, Figure 2a), or do so only at a pre-freshman composition, "developmental" level (Appendix, Figure 2b).²

To my mind, there are distinct advantages in placing native and nonnative speakers in writing classes together, at their appropriate linguistic and rhetorical levels (however that is to be determined, but most places do some placing of students). First, nonnative speakers have access to language development that they do not get in lecture classes. This is particularly important if there is a large immigrant population in the nonnative speaker group because these students generally, and quite naturally, spend time with friends who speak their native language, and use their native language at home with family members, particularly the older generation.³ This arrangement provides important access for traditional foreign students, too, because we know that language develops best when it is being used to accomplish other aims than overt language improvement (Brumfit and Johnson, *Communicative Approach*).

There are, as well, important advantages for the native speakers. For many, whose lives, whether inner city, small town, or suburban, can be fairly parochial, this is an opportunity to learn to accommodate and appreciate cultural diversity. Not only will their education be enhanced as they learn more about the world, but it is to our advantage as well that new generations have greater comprehension of the world and their role in it. The current English Only movement around the country reflects the cultural anxieties that arise with demographic shifts and suggests the importance of this task (Roy, "English"). The goal, of course, is not one of blending and homogenizing, but of providing a context for building equitable exchange and respect.

A disadvantage of separating native and nonnative speakers, besides that of fostering notions of "us" and "them," is that ESL-track courses often do not give nonnative speakers the same kind of composition experience that native speakers receive. Textbooks used are one indication of this disparity. For example, in a specific program where native and nonnative speakers are taught separately, the textbooks used recently were, for the native speakers: Scholes and Comley, *The Practice of Writing*;

Burke, *Twenty Questions*; Maimon, et al, *Writing in the Arts and Sciences*; Mailand, *College Thinking*; and Adelstein and Pival, *The Writing Commitment*. For the nonnative speakers: Ross and Doty, *Writing English: A Composition Text in English as a Foreign Language*. This is not to say that all the texts used for the native speakers are good or that the text used for the nonnative speakers is not good. Rather at issue is the difference in range of experience. This difference reflects, I believe, a tendency toward a reductionist view of what "they" need. As Ann Raimes points out in a recent issue of *The Writing Instructor* devoted entirely to ESL composition, the dominant approach in ESL composition textbooks is deductive, product-centered, and based on a very limited concept of "English for Academic Purposes" ("Teaching ESL Writing," 161).

Although the issue remains arguable—for one thing, it is hard to find instructors who are knowledgeable in both writing and language, and therefore some investment for in-service training is necessary—I advocate keeping students of various backgrounds together. For me, separate is never equal. If a program already separates, so that the decision is already made and institutionalized, or if a writing program administrator's own theoretical and practical decision is to run separate courses, I urge the pairing of sections, so that instructors can work together to set up mixed-group discussions of reading and shared writing activities. In some institutions, the English Language Institute or a similar ESL body handles the composition teaching for matriculated international students. Where this is the case, writing program administrators need to work together with directors of ESL programs on staffing, training of instructors, and curriculum.

Testing, Evaluation, Assessment

Two issues seem to underlie arguments about assessment of second language writers, especially perhaps at the level of graduation proficiency testing. One is gatekeeping. That is, faculty, administration, and alumni may feel that graduates are representatives of the college and that the university is responsible for certifying students linguistically as well as academically. Two principles to remember are: nobody becomes a native speaker; but, in the case of new immigrants, their children will be. Thus, faculty and administrations can be reassured that if nonnative students can understand and be understood, both in writing and in speaking, not with correctness or like a native speaker, but in a manner that allows them to live and work in the discourse community their academic education prepares them for, then appropriate standards have been met. If, on the other hand, those features do not hold, then students need what writing across the curriculum and other language development activities can provide.⁴

The second issue is, at the freshman level, preparation for writing in other courses and, at the graduation level, preparation for jobs. When writing-across-the-curriculum programs begin, WPAs often find that faculty assume they must mark all writing for correctness, and this is one of the reasons they feel they don't have time to incorporate more writing in their classes and certainly not with nonnative speakers. Similarly, writing professionals consulting in business and industry are finding that, although management may perceive their workers' writing problems as those of grammar and punctuation, the problems more often lie with lack of audience awareness and inadequate rhetorical development.⁵ We have perhaps a job of public education as important as the one we do on our home campus.

Testing, as Barbara Weaver points out in her review essay on three major recent books on assessment, can have serious effects on students' academic and professional lives ("Writing Assessment," 39). Those who control the test wield an enormous amount of power. Testing is therefore the wrong arena for the academic community to work through these assumptions about the role of writing in education and the relationship of education to jobs and careers. That is, we need to make certain that testing serves the aims of a program rather than, as so often happens, driving the program from the end. So long as we must live with competence testing at all, such testing must take into account second-language usage. Readers have to learn to read past low-level diversions from native-speaker competence and to develop a sense of what constitutes "too much" distraction in relation to the amount of content generated and the quality of discussion or argument.⁶

One reason for universities' admitting students whose English acquisition is not at a level to enable them to negotiate their college education readily is a liberal one—making education available to the citizenry, of the world in the case of foreign students who will return to their country, or of the U.S., in the case of naturalized citizens, permanent residents, or second-language speakers at other points along the continuum of language acquisition. However, universities do not run on altruism: students pay to attend, and in some cases bring prestige, for example, as graduates in sciences and engineering. It is at least unfair, and at worst exploitive, to admit students who can get through coursework on the basis of multiple choice tests and lab reports but who will not be able to pass university-established writing proficiency exams for graduation. Universities must therefore make support systems available, for example, to enable students to attend English language institutes, present on many campuses, for language development when needed. These institutes are for the most part staffed with specialists in developing communicative competence. However, they are usually independent of the internal university structure, most are run by continuing

education offices, and they are generally quite expensive. Affluent international students are able to attend such institutes to gain linguistic certification for entrance to the university, but new immigrants and refugees are unlikely to be able to afford it. Many universities, by virtue of this structure, are missing out on a great deal of knowledge and experience, not to mention curriculum, since the courses are in place. English departments or writing programs would thus not have to mount language development and acculturation courses; but if they do, they must be very clear that these do not replace whatever a writing program, as part of the academic community, establishes as the education it values in freshman or other levels of composition.

The necessary components in a writing program that serves second language writers must be: a program and courses that provide and use social context for writing and language development, teachers who know about both writing and language, and assessment that takes into account principles of language acquisition and literacy development. We need to ensure that second language writers, whether international students or new immigrants, have the full benefit of theory and research in both language acquisition and composition.

Notes

¹Most published work on contrastive rhetorics starts with references to Kaplan (1966), but I am reluctant to refer to this work without a disclaimer, or at least a caveat. That cultural differences exist with regard to valued styles, registers, and organizational patterns for certain types of writing seems undeniable. However, the basis for much contrastive rhetoric study seems to be the assumption that English is entirely a linear style, and further, that English in some sense "owns" linear style. That is, lacking in contrastive rhetoric studies is an understanding that English, along with other linguistic cultures, are multivariate: they have a variety of styles available, accessible to writers according to the rhetorical contexts in which they write. Also in Kaplan's early contrastive rhetoric study are attitudes that might have been common at the time but should certainly make us uncomfortable now, such as "the English class must not aim too high" (20). The important thing for teachers of writing to multicultural and multilingual groups is that there *are* differences. This seems to me more important than knowing precisely what the differences are.

²A word of explanation about the parentheses around "developmental" in 4 and 5 in the Appendix. They are there to reflect what I sense is current discomfort in the field of composition with the available labels for this level of writing instruction. I myself never use "remedial." I am reluctant to use "Basic Writing" only because of the linkage for many people with "basic skills," and indeed, the common treatment of it as basic skills—that is, the writing of individual paragraphs, starting with topic sentences, grammar review, reading for topic sentences in short materials, comprehension questions, and so on. When I use "Basic Writing," I mean the generation of essay-length text, embedded in a social

context, with grammar integrated to the writing as editing, governed by students' needs, with reading for ideation and interaction—the current best example being Bartholomae and Petrosky's *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*. The term "developmental" itself is problematic because of its connection with "maturational" as a psychologically and physiologically determined sequence.

The stereotypes of theory, content, and method attached to these labels are important because they contribute to the TESL community's strong insistence that their students are not "remedial" (as of course they aren't), and therefore do not need "basic writing," which I believe is arguable, given the definition of Basic Writing above. The other loophole in "developmental" is that, after all, all writing courses, and perhaps all education, is developmental, so it's odd to single out one level for the name. In any case, I assume the architectural slot I'm talking about is recognizable, and the point here is that some programs keep native and nonnative students together at all levels, while some separate at pre-freshman composition levels and bring together for freshman composition.

³In a study of success and failure of 150 nonnative speakers of English in Basic Writing at California State University, Los Angeles, the single most powerful variable was the amount of English spoken outside of class (Mano, Sandra and Roy, "Variables Affecting Success of ESL Students in Basic Writing Classes," unpublished).

⁴Peter Elbow, describing the reduction of required composition courses and the proliferation of graduation writing proficiency exams, asks "Might [it] be true generally? That we get more evaluation of writing as we get less instruction?" (Connolly and Vilardi, *New Methods*).

⁵In my own experience consulting for public utilities on improving writing skills of line workers, secretarial staff, and engineers, whose written products comprise everything from field repair reports to project proposals, I find supervisors editing and correcting employees' written work in ways that alienate workers and inhibit whatever on-the-job development might naturally occur. These supervisors' response to second language and what we might call basic writing levels of prose recalls Greenbaum and Taylor's research on teachers' correction strategies, showing that instructors often "correct" things that are not wrong, often give the wrong labels, or make incorrect changes for things that are wrong. This carry-over of what may have been learned from earlier experiences in English classes about how to respond to the writing of people who are in an inferior position, who are somehow "not like us," has long-term ramifications.

⁶For reasons of length, I leave untouched the issue of students for whom standard English is a second dialect. However, many of the same conditions apply. See Bizzell, "Arguing About Literacy."

Appendix

Current ESL Administrative Models

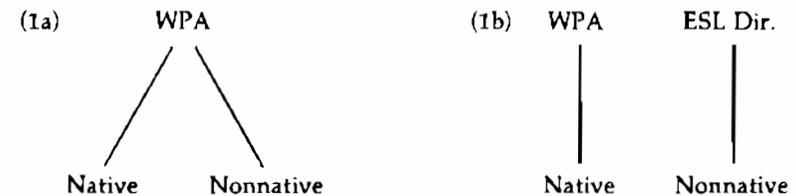


Figure 1. Relationship of WPA to writing instruction for native and non-native speakers.

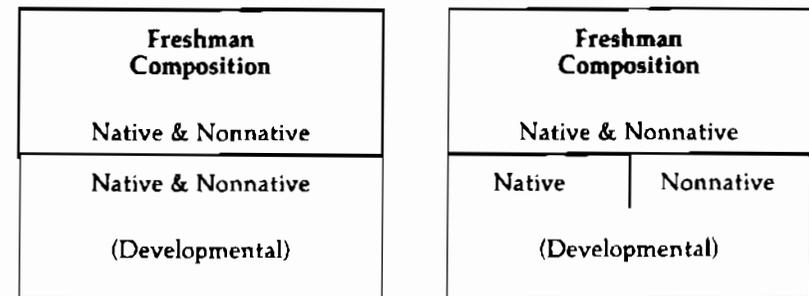


Figure 2. Programs in which native and nonnative English speakers receive writing instruction together.

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