
An Examination of Writing Program Administrators' Options for the Placement of ESL Students in First Year Writing Classes

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How can writing program administrators best serve ESL students in first year composition programs? What special instructional options, if any, should they make available for these students? Such questions are being asked with increasing urgency at colleges and universities in the USA, many of which enroll substantial and steadily growing numbers of ESL students. These questions are not new. Discussions of instructional needs of and options for ESL writers in the literature on writing instruction appear as early as the beginning of the 1950's (Gibian; Ives) and have continued to appear, somewhat sporadically, up to the present. Most offer their perceptions of the similarities and differences of ESL and native English speaking (NES) writers and their suggestions for dealing with the differences, primarily in classrooms dominated by ESL writers (Benson, Deming, Denzer, and Valeri-Gold; Chirinos, Rundquist, and Washburn; Clark; England; Land and Whitley; Macha; Ostler; Schlumberger and Clymer; Scull). Some (Hafernik; McKay) go further and argue that salient differences between ESL and NES writers warrant separate sections of first year writing classes; others (Howard; Roy, "Alliance," "ESL"), seeing similarities between the two groups as more important, argue against separate sections.

It is my aim in this article to build on and broaden the scope of the aforementioned discussion. I propose to do this by (1) taking a more in depth look at the fairly large body of scholarship involving comparisons of ESL and NES writing, or more generally, comparisons of first language (L1) and second language (L2) writing; and (2) considering, in light of this scholarship, four placement options for ESL writers. My primary purpose is not to argue for or against any particular option, but to explore each in terms of its implications for students, teachers, administrators, and graduate education programs in ESL and rhetoric and composition.

The Research

The scholarship suggests that L1 and L2 writing are similar in their broad outlines; that is, it has been shown that both L1 and L2 writers employ recursive composing processes, involving planning, writing, and revising, to generate and develop their ideas and to find appropriate rhetorical and linguistic means to

express them. However, a close examination of L1 and L2 writing, in my view, reveals salient and important differences. This belief is supported by the intuitions of ESL writers' (Silva, "L1") and ESL writing practitioners' (Raimes) and by the results of comparative empirical research, which I will briefly review below. (See Silva ("Toward") for documentation and a fuller account of this research).

The findings from this research paint a picture of L2 writing as distinct from and simpler and less effective than L1 writing (in the eyes of L1 readers, at least). Though general composing patterns are similar in L1 and L2, it seems that L2 composing is more constrained, more difficult, and less effective. In the research, L2 writers did less planning (global and local) and had more difficulty with setting goals and generating and organizing material. Their transcribing was more laborious, less fluent, and less productive—reflecting a lack of lexical resources. They reviewed, reread, and reflected on their written texts less, revised more—but with more difficulty—and, were less able to revise intuitively, that is, on the basis of what "sounded" good.

At the global level, L2 writers' texts were less fluent (contained fewer words), less accurate (had more errors), and less effective (received lower holistic ratings). In terms of structure, their texts often exhibited distinct patterns of exposition, argumentation, and narration; their responses to two particular types of academic writing tasks—answering essay exam questions and using background reading texts—were different and less effective. Their orientation of readers was deemed less appropriate and acceptable.

At the local level, L2 writers' texts were stylistically distinct and simpler in structure. Their sentences included more but shorter t-units, fewer but longer clauses, more coordination, less subordination, less noun modification, and less passivization. They evidenced distinct patterns in the use of cohesive devices; particularly they used more conjunctive and fewer lexical ties. They also exhibited less lexical control, variety, and sophistication overall.

In essence, the findings of this comparative research suggest that ESL writers and their NES counterparts can differ in important ways and that, consequently, these differences—strategic, rhetorical, and linguistic—indicate a need for a careful consideration of placement options for ESL students in first year writing programs.

The Options

Mainstreaming

One option is to "mainstream" ESL writers, that is, to place them into first year composition courses designed for and dominated by NES writers—the sink or swim option. On the surface, this would seem to be the easiest route—the path of least resistance—for the administrator; no new course would need to be created, staffed, or supervised. In theory, mainstreamed ESL and NES students would profit from their interaction in such classes, gaining new cultural and linguistic insights. However, given their heavy teaching loads and large class

enrollments, teachers of such classes will probably not be able to devote the extra time and attention ESL writers may require. Furthermore, even if these teachers can spare the time, they may not be prepared to deal with ESL students' cultural, rhetorical, and linguistic differences, to meet their special needs. ESL students might inadvertently be held to unrealistic NES standards. They might be expected to have an NES student's familiarity with American culture, history, conventions, and rhetorical patterns. They might be expected to have native speaker intuitions about English and be penalized for making errors—for example, having problems with articles, prepositions, verb forms, etc.—that represent a natural stage in second language development. They may be asked to adopt strategies and work under time constraints that do not make sense for L2 writers. In short, mainstreamed ESL writers could be put at a severe disadvantage; their differences might be seen and treated as intellectual deficiencies. This, in turn, could result in resentment, alienation, loss of self confidence, poor grades, and, ultimately, academic failure.

Basic Writing

A second option is placing ESL students in basic or developmental writing classes designed primarily for inexperienced NES writers. The potential advantages for this course of action are, in part, the same as for the first option—no new classes are needed (assuming that basic writing classes are already provided) and ESL and NES writers are in a position to interact with and learn from each other on a variety of levels. A further potential advantage is that basic writing teachers are likely to be more sensitive to the needs of “different” students and—if their classes are smaller—be in a better position to give ESL writers some extra attention. However, basic writing teachers are typically prepared to teach inexperienced and/or educationally disadvantaged native English speakers and may not have any more insight into the characteristics and needs of ESL writers than those who teach mainstream classes; thus they may have the same unrealistic expectations and, consequently, the same problems. Furthermore, it must be recognized that ESL writers are not necessarily basic writers. Many are, in fact, very skilled and experienced in writing in their native language (and sometimes in English too). Therefore, curricula, syllabi, methods, and techniques designed for NES basic writers may not be appropriate for this group of ESL writers. Moreover, even if ESL writers are unskilled and inexperienced in writing (in their L1 and/or L2), their difficulties in writing, though superficially similar to those of NES basic writers, may have different underlying causes. For example, a linguistic problem for an NES basic writer might result from the transfer of oral language patterns and/or unfamiliarity with the written code; the same problem in an ESL writer might be a result of transfer of L1 linguistic patterns and/or an incomplete understanding of a particular grammar rule in English. Similarly, an organizational problem of a basic writer could spring from a lack of exposure to academic texts, whereas the same problem in an ESL student's writing might be a result of transfer of culturally conditioned rhetorical patterns (examples from McKay). The central point here is that a common response to seemingly similar problems in the writing of ESL and NES

basic writers could be wholly inappropriate. Finally, putting ESL writers into NES oriented basic writing classes could alienate both groups of students involved. NES basic writing students could infer that they are viewed as being somehow outside of their own culture, as non-native speakers of their own language. ESL students who are skilled and experienced writers could infer that they are being penalized for being culturally and/or linguistically different, that to be different is to be deficient. (See the third chapter of Leki for an extensive treatment of the ESL vs basic writer issue.)

ESL Writing

A third option is to offer credit bearing, requirement fulfilling first year writing classes especially designed and designated for ESL students. Given teachers knowledgeable about and curricula informed by research in both second language and composition studies, this option could prove to be an efficient and effective means for meeting the special needs of ESL writers. Additionally, on many campuses, such classes might constitute the only sheltered academic environments available to nonnative English speakers and thus provide at least one context in which ESL students are not isolated, where they are in a position to meet, work, and develop a sense of community with those in a similar situation. Furthermore, providing such courses and/or contexts for ESL students indicates that a writing program is willing to give more than lip service to efforts to support and retain nonnative English speaking students on campus.

However, this option does not come without a price. It requires that a new program component be created and administered and that present staff be reoriented or new staff hired—assuming that qualified individuals are available on campus or in the community. Moreover, pursuing this option could, for some, raise the specter of segregation, of putting ESL students in a separate but unequal position, of depriving them of the opportunity to interact with and learn from their NES peers and vice versa. (However, this argument pales a bit in light of the fact that ESL and NES students will be together in virtually all of their other (non-composition) classes.) Finally, ESL writing classes will probably be seen by some on campus as “remedial” in some sense (though these same individuals would probably not see foreign language classes as remedial—classes where NES students rarely attain the levels of proficiency in the L2 that ESL students have in English). Consequently, these ESL writing classes might be devalued, given second class status—as is also regrettably the case with basic writing courses for NES students.

Cross Cultural Composition

A fourth option is to offer first year writing classes designed to include more or less equal numbers of ESL and NES students: The goal in such arrangements is to meet the instructional needs of both groups and, as a dividend, to foster crosscultural understanding, communication, and collaboration. Assuming the availability of practitioners with a background in designing and teaching courses for ESL and NES writers, this option has the potential to enrich both groups involved, culturally and linguistically, as well as to enhance their writing

abilities. Offering such classes could help to assuage concerns about segregation of ESL students and about ESL writing instruction as remediation, and, at the same time, cast the writing program in a leadership role in multicultural and international initiatives on campus.

While this option might offer the most benefits, it could also be the most challenging to implement. As with the third (exclusively ESL) option, a new program component would need to be created, staffed, and supervised. However, staffing this option—finding and/or preparing substantial numbers of practitioners equally qualified for and comfortable dealing with ESL and NES writers—could be particularly problematic. This option could also give rise to some logistical concerns; for example, how would the enrollment of more or less equal numbers of ESL and NES students in particular classes be accomplished?

Discussion

In light of the foregoing then, which of the options, as presented here, would seem to be in the best interest of ESL students, that is, which one would be least likely to disadvantage them and most likely to successfully address their needs? For me, the mainstream option seems the least desirable, and the basic writing option, not much better; the ESL writing option seems more promising and the crosscultural option most.

However, asking which one option is the best may not be the most constructive way of approaching this problem. An optimal response to this problem might be to offer ESL students as many of these options (and more) as resources permit. After all, there are many types of ESL students. Some of the more proficient and confident ESL students might welcome the challenge of the mainstream classroom. Some ESL students may fit the basic writer profile and be well served by the basic writing option. Some—and I would suspect, the majority—would be most comfortable with the ESL and crosscultural options, where curricula and instruction are, by design, sensitive to L2 writers' needs.

Is offering ESL students such a range of options profligate and unrealistic, especially in these times of fiscal restraint? I don't believe so. These students will all need to be enrolled in first year writing classes, regardless of how many options they are given. The problem would seem to be one of human rather than financial resources, of finding enough teachers knowledgeable about and experienced in working with ESL writers or with ESL and NES writers. In the short run, writing program administrators, alone or perhaps with the aid of an ESL specialist, will need to scramble to find those rare individuals with the requisite qualifications or reorient teachers of mainstream classes. Ultimately, this is a problem that needs to be addressed in graduate programs in ESL and rhetoric and composition. ESL teacher educators need to acknowledge that writing instruction is becoming a central, if not the central, element of ESL teaching in colleges and universities in the USA, and they need to adjust their programs accordingly, that is, to provide their students with or refer them to

courses that deal with the theory and practice of writing and writing instruction, in L1 and in L2. Graduate programs in rhetoric and composition need to acknowledge that their teachers will, in all likelihood, be involved with classes and/or programs that include substantial and growing numbers of nonnative English speakers and should provide their students with or refer them to courses that deal with the theory and practice of second language learning and teaching, including L2 writing. Clearly then, a need for enhanced articulation and cooperation between graduate programs in ESL and rhetoric and composition in the preparation of writing practitioners is indicated.

Is this too ambitious an agenda? Can writing programs afford to accommodate ESL writers? Given the reality of multiculturalism and the goal of providing equal opportunity for a quality education, can they afford not to?

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