

Review

Bruce, Shanti, and Ben Rafoth. *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*. Portsmouth, NH: Boyton/Cook-Heinemann, 2004. 192 pages. \$21.00 (paperback; cloth available).

Terese Thonus

In recent years, the market for teacher guides on second language writing has exploded, and publishers have responded with such excellent offerings as Leki's 1992 classic, *Understanding ESL Writers*, Kroll's wide-ranging, edited volume, *Exploring the Dynamics of Second Language Writing* (2003), and Casanave's thoughtful *Controversies in Second Language Writing: Dilemmas and Decisions in Research and Instruction* (2004). *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors* is a departure from this growing literature on second language (L2) writing instruction. It is a long-awaited collection of writings on the theory and practice of *tutoring* the fastest-growing group of writing center clients: students for whom English is a second (or nonnative) language. As Ilona Leki announces in the foreword, *ESL Writers* "is the first book-length attempt to address the issue of how the promise of the writing center might be better realized for L2 students" (xi).

Editors Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth, both of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, have collected fifteen articles on a variety of topics of interest to writing tutors and writing center administrators. In the introduction to the volume, they list five questions they hope to answer in the volume:

- Why does interaction in the writing center between people from different cultures often feel so different?
- What can tutors do in sessions with ESL writers besides point out problems with grammar and usage?
- How can conferences with ESL writers become more interactive and less one-sided?

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- How far should tutors go in helping ESL writers? What are the limits?
 - What do ESL students think about the assistance they receive in the writing center? (xiii)

The book is divided into three sections. Part I (Cultural Contexts) is comprised of two chapters, “Insights into Cultural Divides” (Hayward) and “Theoretical Perspectives on Learning a Second Language” (Tseng). The largest section of the book, Part II (The ESL Tutoring Session), is comprised of ten chapters and deals with a wide range of topics from “teaching the tutorial” (Bruce’s “Getting Started”) to dealing with global concerns (Matsuda and Cox’s “Reading an ESL Writer’s Text”) to handling local errors (Linville’s “Editing Line by Line”). Three of the chapters deal with tutoring methodology in the face of L2 writers’ needs: “Avoiding Appropriation” (Severino), “Raising Questions About Plagiarism” (Bouman), and “Is This My Job?” (Gillespie), this last essay answering the question, “How are tutors to address needs that go beyond writing?” (ix). The last section of the book, Part III (A Broader View), comprised of three chapters, is described by Bruce and Rafoth as “a few issues that have arisen in the staff meetings in our own writing center and during after-hours discussions” (xv). These are “The Role of Writing in Higher Education Abroad” (Bräuer), “Trying to Explain English” (Rafoth), and “ESL Students Share Their Writing Center Experiences” (Bruce).

According to my reading, the best chapters by far in the book are chapter 5, Severino’s “Avoiding Appropriation” and chapter 11, Gillespie’s “Is This My Job?” because these engage readers in questioning of two theoretical debates in writing center research by adding “the second language twist.” In terms of step-by-step instructions for tutors, Amy Jo Minnett’s “‘Earth Aches by Midnight’: Helping ESL Writers Clarify Their Intended Meaning” (chapter 6) is exceptionally engaging. Less relevant to the tutoring of L2 writers, in my view, are chapter 2, “Theoretical Perspectives on Learning a Second Language” (Tseng)—why do tutors need to know about second language acquisition research traditions?; chapter 12, “Creative Writing Workshops for ESL Writers” (Dvorak)—not many of the ESL students I have met approach the writing center to “broaden their experiences beyond the narrow limits of academic discourse” (ix); and chapter 13, “The Role of Writing in Higher Education Abroad” (Bräuer)—why do tutors need to read about an issue that is covered sufficiently in other chapters in the volume?

The editors are to be commended for venturing into uncharted waters in their endeavor. They and the book’s contributors, with backgrounds in composition and writing center theory, approach with caution the academic

territories of applied linguistics, teaching English as a second language, and second language writing instruction. They know their audience(s) well; they recognize tutors' expertise and respect their fears of failing ESL writers. The three-page glossary, with important definitions of terms used to describe the social, cognitive, and linguistic characteristics of English learners and their writing, testifies to that, as does the inclusion of the tales of three ESL writers' writing center experiences (the final chapter of the volume, which might have been more effectively positioned at the beginning).

Notwithstanding these strengths, in three respects I find *ESL Writers* wanting: its choice of authors, its limited definition of "ESL," and its restricted audience.

As they begin, compilers of edited volumes must "sketch out" the structure of the book and find authors who will contribute topics that "fit in" to the overall schema. The temptation is to take the easy road by assigning topics to their graduate students and those whose work is familiar without doing the difficult research necessary to find authors who, through a history of research and publishing, can best address those topics in an authoritative way (*author* and *authoritative* come from the same Latin root). Unfortunately, whether because of time constraints or favoritism, Rafoth and Bruce succumbed to temptation. A third of the chapters (five of fifteen) are contributed by PhD candidates at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. In my view, this editorial decision reduces the credibility of the volume both because of the authors' limited experience and because of the narrow approach generated by a single writing center and its actors. Clearly, Rafoth and Bruce want peer tutors and graduate students to join the discourse in their chosen fields; I would argue that the place for such interaction with specialists is in conference presentations and in theses and dissertations. Certainly they want the quality of their writing and composition programs to be known nationally and even worldwide; University of New Hampshire's Paul Kei Matsuda does this in an academically justifiable manner by inviting his graduate student Michelle Cox to coauthor a chapter with him ("Reading an ESL Writer's Text"). From editors of a book on a topic of such importance, released by Boynton/Cook-Heinemann, a leader in educational publishing, I would have expected less obvious bias.

A second area of weakness is the limited definition of "ESL," which may not adequately describe the second language writer clientele of many US writing centers. "For our purposes in the book," explain the editors, "[the ESL writer] is anyone whose native language is not English, who is visiting the United States from another country to study at a college or university, and who is in the process of learning to write (and speak) in English" (xiii). But what about US immigrant students for whom English is their strongest and perhaps only academic language? Recent literature has described the

difficulties these bilingual (often termed “ESL”) students have with writing (see “Serving Generation 1.5 Learners”), yet there is not one word about their interaction with the writing center in this volume. That absence is unfortunate, given the direction posed by Jessica Williams and Carol Severino in their introduction to a 2004 special issue of *Journal of Second Language Writing* dedicated to the writing center and L2 writers, an issue focusing on “the increasing use of WCs by L2 writers, especially the growing generation 1.5 population in the U.S.” (170).

Third and finally, Rafoth and Bruce restrict the book’s audience to “peer tutors working in a campus writing center who assist college students learning to write in English as a second language” (xiii). The notion that those who tutor ESL students are peers is erroneous, and it is a notion of which tutors should be disabused as soon as possible. (For more research on this important matter, see “Triangulation in the Writing Center” and “What’s the Difference?”) Many “peer tutors” have no experience as language learners, have never traveled overseas, and have very limited exposure to and interaction with second language learners, either immigrant or international. As one of Blau et al.’s tutor participants stated, “If we were peers, we’d have no problem editing” (23). Several authors in the volume suggest that tutors working with ESL writers need a good deal of additional training, including, one would assume, the reading of this book as a guide. I could not agree more, and I recommend relevant chapters of *ESL Writers* to writing center administrators and tutors for two purposes: (1) as readings for an ongoing “learning to tutor” workshop or credit-bearing course and (2) as a reference for tutors who find themselves in particular difficulty as they work with second language writers.

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