

## Review Essay

### Second Language Writers in College Composition Programs: Toward Awareness, Knowledge and Action

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Ferris, Dana R. *Teaching College Writing to Diverse Student Populations*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan P, 2009. 169 pages.

Leki, Ilona. *Undergraduates in a Second Language: Challenges and Complexities of Academic Literacy Development*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2007. 332 pages.

Roberge, Mark, Meryl Siegal, and Linda Harklau. *Generation 1.5 in College Composition: Teaching Academic Writing to U.S.-Educated Learners of ESL*. New York: Routledge, 2009. 288 pages.

The presence of second language writers—including both international and resident students—has become an undeniable reality in writing programs across North America. While they share many characteristics with so-called native-English users, they also bring various differences that pose unique challenges for WPAs. Further complicating the situation is the growing diversity within the second language writer population in terms of their educational pathways, level of English proficiency, native languages, and first language literacy. The three books under review here provide writing teachers and WPAs with important insights and practical suggestions for addressing the growing diversity among second language writers.

In *Teaching College Writing to Diverse Student Populations*, Dana Ferris provides an understanding of a diverse array of second language writers who enroll in college composition classrooms. The first part (Chapters 1–2) presents definitions and descriptions of second language writers and the rationale for categorizing these students into three subgroups based on

their characteristics: international students, late-arriving resident students, and early-arriving resident students. Part II (Chapters 3–5) considers practical and pedagogical implications of a division of different groups of second language writers. At the program level, Ferris addresses such topics as curriculum design, placement practices, assessment, and teacher preparation. She also discusses specific course design considerations, such as needs analysis, material selection, specific language instruction, and classroom assessment and grading practices. The concluding section (Chapter 6 and Postscript) provides some innovative program and instructional models as well as suggestions for future research. The insights provided by this book are compelling because Ferris speaks not only from her research expertise but also from her years of experience in working with a diverse array of second language writers in the writing classroom.

Moving beyond the context of the first-year composition program, Ilona Leki's *Undergraduates in a Second Language: Challenges and Complexities of Academic Literacy Development* relates stories of the literacy development of second language writers throughout their college careers. This book is based on a longitudinal study of four focal students—Ben, Yang, Jan, and Yuko (pseudonyms)—beginning with their first-year ESL writing classes and continuing onto their specific disciplines—engineering, nursing, business, and social work—and eventually to the students' graduation and the start of their careers. After the first chapter, which presents the study's procedures, context, participants, and key findings, the book details each student's story in four different chapters (Chapters 2–5) with a focus on several common issues: students' backgrounds (e.g., immigration status, age, length of time in the United States, and English proficiency), literacy experiences, "socioacademic relations" (vii), and ideologies in education. The final three chapters discuss specific issues related to literacy development pathways, such as the role of general-education courses and major courses. These chapters also consider the role of writing courses in preparing each student for his or her specific discipline and future career. This book makes a compelling case that students' failures, successes, and struggles "cannot be understood without reference to [their] social context" (259), in which peers and professors play key roles. The experiences of these students also remind us that learning and writing in a second language requires more time and effort than in a first language. (This point may seem obvious to some, but apparently not to all writing teachers.)

While the first two books focus on both international and resident second language writers, *Generation 1.5 in College Composition: Teaching Academic Writing to U.S.-Educated Learners of ESL*, edited by Mark Roberge, Meryl Siegal, and Linda Harklau, takes a closer look at various

issues surrounding resident second language writers. Part I (Chapters 1–5) lays a foundation by discussing the complexity of issues related to resident second language writers from various perspectives. A chapter by Roberge describes historical, sociopolitical, and economic backgrounds of resident second language writers and how teachers might address their needs in the writing classroom. The next two chapters look into the situation of changing demographics of students in U.S. higher education and address related issues, including the diversity of resident second language writers and their access to college and retention (Harklau and Siegal) as well as their settlement patterns, needs in K-12 schools, and transition to college (Louie). Paul Kei Matsuda and Aya Matsuda trace the history of resident second language writers back to the 1950s and explain why college TESOL remained silent on the issue of resident students and how the term “generation 1.5” has masked the historical presence of the very population it was supposed to describe. Sarah Benesch challenges the modernist assumption behind the term “generation 1.5” that tends to uphold the dominant language ideology in teaching and assessment.

Part II (Chapters 6–10) presents studies of resident second language writers’ transition from high school to college and their writing experiences at community colleges. Harriett Allison investigates reading and writing experiences of a group of resident second language writers and finds that literacy tasks assigned in school were “determined by what will be assessed on high stakes standardized tests” (83) rather than realistic literacy activities relevant to students’ academic goals. Jan Frodesen’s longitudinal study of academic writing development of a late arriving resident student demonstrates the complexity of students’ linguistic identity and the challenges of determining appropriate placement into different types of writing courses. Cathryn Crosby examines reading and writing difficulties of two resident second language writers in a first-year composition course and discusses the strategies the students used to overcome the challenges in completing writing assignments. Jennifer A. Mott-Smith reports experiences of five resident second language students with a writing proficiency exam and its impact on the standard English ideology they had internalized. Genevieve Patthey, Joan Thomas-Spiegel, and Paul Dillon document how community colleges in California have addressed the needs of resident second language writers in composition courses.

The final part (Chapters 11–16) concludes with pedagogical and curricular approaches to working with resident second language writers. The first three chapters in this section present descriptions of different curriculum designs that were developed in response to the particular needs of resident second language writers (Murie and Fitzpatrick; Holten; Reynolds,

Bae, and Wilson). Ann M. Johns, based on her years of experience working with resident second writers, encourages teachers to develop students' rhetorical flexibility, which she believes "enables them [students] to move from the familiar, assess an academic situation, and write successfully in the genre that each situation requires" (204). Mary J. Schleppegrell advocates the use of systematic functional linguistics (SFL), which emphasizes content and meaning over form, in working with resident second language writers' grammar issues. Sugie Goen-Salter, Patricia Porter, and Deborah Vandommelen discuss pedagogical principles and share writing activities successfully used with resident second language students at San Francisco State University.

Together, the three books provide insights into the backgrounds, characteristics and needs of increasingly diverse groups of second language writers as well as many of the key issues that need to be considered as WPAs respond to their presence. One of the most important issues highlighted by these publications is the implications of labels that are used to describe these students. There is no clear consensus on what terms to use in referring to these diverse students because no term can adequately capture the complexity of individual students' backgrounds, characteristics and needs. Terms, such as "generation 1.5," are useful in highlighting the presence of a population that has been overshadowed by other labels, but they can also cause confusion as people attach different meanings to the terms based on the particular population they are working with. It is also important to keep in mind that students may not identify with the terms that are used to label them. The complexity of labeling is especially problematic for WPAs because the labels that are used in course titles and descriptions have serious implications for placement practices (Costino and Hyon).

The question of teacher qualification is another important issue for WPAs who hire and train writing teachers. As these books make clear, second language writers' diverse characteristics and needs require writing teachers to develop a broader range of knowledge about the diverse student population, about language and writing, and about pedagogical strategies that are appropriate for all students. As Leki points out, however, second language writers' writing experience is affected by their language proficiency. Yet, many writing teachers today do not consider sentence-level language issues to be part of their teaching responsibility, even though the same teachers may include grammar as part of the assessment criteria. Thus, WPAs need to help all writing teachers develop the ability to facilitate students' language development as well as rhetorical proficiency while also resisting the dominant language ideology.

As the student population in writing programs continues to shift, it is important for WPAs to keep abreast of the demographic trends as well as ways to address the presence and needs of diverse groups of students. Ferris's book is particularly useful in understanding a range of student characteristics and needs as well as ways of addressing those needs in the writing classroom. Leki's work provides an intimate understanding of what it is like for students to be second language writers in institutions of U.S. higher education. Roberge et al. helps the readers understand various issues related to resident second language writers. While there may not be a single solution that works in all situations, these three books would certainly help teachers and WPAs understand the complexity of the issues involved in responding to the presence and needs of various groups of second language writers who form an integral part of the new norm in higher education.

#### WORKS CITED

- Costino, Kimberly A., and Sunny Hyon. "A Class for Students Like Me': Reconsidering Relationships Among Identity Labels, Residency Status, and Students' Perceptions for Mainstream or Multilingual Composition." *Journal of Second Language Writing* 16.2 (2007): 63–81. Print.

