

# ESL Writers in the Mainstream College Classroom



**E**nglish-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) programs on U.S. college campuses play a vital role in helping students develop academic English skills to a certain threshold of success, usually defined by a particular score on a language proficiency test such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). However, educators who teach mainstream college classes may expect that threshold of success to be defined as native-like use of English.<sup>1</sup> These educators are surprised to find that while some students who completed the ESL program or scored high enough on the TOEFL meet this expectation, others are still developing their English skills. As a result, these students continue to be referred to as “ESL” students even though they are enrolled in mainstream college classes.<sup>2</sup>

College educators often find ESL student writing especially unpredictable. Students who appear native-like in conversation and demeanor can still make “ESL” errors in their writing such as inaccurate mixing of verb tense or incorrect use of articles. At the same time, ESL students who struggle with listening and speaking might also struggle with writing, or they may produce writing at a higher level than expected. Consequently, many college educators who regularly assign writing in their classes find ESL student writing challenging to read and assess.

The purpose of this article, therefore, is to offer insight on how college educators can better understand ESL students in their classrooms, particularly from three different perspectives: ESL students’ backgrounds, the texts they produce, and the errors they make. The article then concludes with four suggestions for how educators may use this new understanding to choose teaching practices that will help ESL students succeed in mainstream college classes.

## **Understanding ESL Students’ Backgrounds**

The most recent Open Doors Report from the Institute of International Education reveals that more than one million international students were enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities in the 2015-2016 academic year, a seven percent increase over the previous year and the continuation of a broader increase over the past 50 years.<sup>3</sup> Many of these international students are English-language learners who enroll in college ESL programs before entering undergraduate and graduate-degree programs. Also, the Open Door Report statistics do not account for the children of immigrants who have become permanent residents or naturalized citizens but still identify as ESL students upon entering college.

Consequently, U.S. college classrooms today are com-

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BY CHRISTIAN STUART

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# Cultivating a Culture of Success

prised of growing numbers of ESL students with varying backgrounds. In most cases, these students have successfully completed ESL programs or scored high enough on a language proficiency test to enroll in mainstream classes. Some of them could still benefit from additional English-language support. Others may *appear* to no longer need English-language support but actually do need assistance in various areas, including writing.

Joy Reid, a TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) scholar specializing in ESL writing, provides a useful way of understanding how these students' varying backgrounds reveal their different needs as college writers. She calls international ESL students "eye" learners because although a majority of them have learned English "through their eyes [by] studying vocabulary, verb forms, and language rules,"<sup>4</sup> they may have limited experience using conversational English. Because of their status as international students, these "eye" learners have often developed sophisticated literacy skills in their first languages and may have potentially transferable academic writing abilities from their secondary or even tertiary school experiences. Consequently, some international students struggle conversationally in class but show an ability to produce acceptable-quality academic genres such as essays, research papers, lab reports, and proposals.

At the same time, international students can vary widely. Some may come from countries where English is used in ed-

ucational contexts, while others may not. Some come from educational backgrounds where lecture-based, teacher-centered classes are the norm and view collaborative, student-centered classes as unfamiliar and even unnerving. Other international students may have a difficult time being critical in their writing, as they have been taught to respect the authority of published texts. For these students, taking a stance questioning the view of a celebrated scholar or writer is counterintuitive.

Furthermore, Reid calls U.S. citizen and permanent-resident ESL students "ear" learners because a majority of these students have lived in the U.S. for an extended period of time and have "[learned] English principally through oral trial and error."<sup>5</sup> These "ear" learners have had more exposure to conversational English than their "eye" learner peers. "Ear" learners may also be more comfortable with U.S. classroom practices than international students, since many of them attended U.S. middle and high schools. However, these students may struggle with writing. Many of them began formal schooling in the U.S. at a young age but continued to speak their first language at home, so they

may not have fully developed literacy skills in either their first language or in English.<sup>6</sup> Thus, U.S. citizen and permanent-resident ESL students may need extra assistance with their writing despite their apparent comfort levels in the classroom and ability to converse without difficulty.

## Understanding ESL Writers' Texts

Even when ESL students have demonstrated a high proficiency in English, perhaps by successfully completing an on-campus ESL program or by scoring well above the college's required score on the TOEFL, it is not unusual for them to still struggle with writing assignments in mainstream college classes. One possible explanation for this comes from contrastive rhetoric scholarship (the study of how writing in a second language is influenced by first language and culture). A subfield of TESOL, contrastive rhetoric is rooted in the work of Robert Kaplan, who in 1966 published a groundbreaking article suggesting that ESL writing can be difficult to read from a Western educator's point of view because of cultural differences in "thought patterns" that shape the logic and organization of such writing.<sup>7</sup>

According to Kaplan's argument, based on analysis of writing authored by students from different cultural backgrounds, ESL students write and produce texts that are logical (i.e., they make sense) from a particular cultural perspective of the writer, but read in the context of another cultural

perspective are illogical and do not make sense.<sup>8</sup> ESL writers from Korea or Japan, for instance, might not explicitly state the main point (thesis) until the very end of an essay, which reflects accepted rhetorical practice in those cultures. For readers expecting the seemingly linear organizational pattern of writing in English—main point stated up front, followed by detailed support—Korean and Japanese students' texts in English may appear indirect and unfocused.

Since Kaplan's publication, many scholars have studied contrastive rhetoric in ESL writing. One particularly significant revelation to emerge from this scholarship is that English is a "writer-responsible" language, meaning that the onus is placed on *writers* of texts in English to make the writing explicit and understandable.<sup>9</sup> ESL writers, however, may come from cultures where the language is "reader-responsible" (e.g., Korean and Japanese), meaning that it is understood that *readers* make an effort, as part of the reading process, to understand the main point of a text, which is often only implicitly stated.<sup>10</sup>

The challenges that ESL writers face in mainstream college classes, therefore, can go beyond language issues. These students may demonstrate adequate vocabulary and knowledge of English grammar, but lack awareness of their expected "writer responsibility" or of the organizational patterns that define the many different academic genres U.S. college professors assign in their classes. As a consequence, ESL writing, even if it is clear and mostly error-free, can sometimes come across as indirect, clichéd, or overly personal when educators are expecting focused analysis, objective stances, and a demonstration of critical thinking. The simplistic nature of some ESL writing may reflect the student's unawareness of implicit expectations about writing in mainstream U.S. college contexts and have nothing to do with a lack of English-language proficiency or an inability to think in a sophisticated way. For these students, explicit instruction on educators' expectations for written work may go a long way toward helping them succeed.

### Understanding ESL Students' Writing Errors

Research has revealed certain identifiable error patterns common to ESL writers. Handbooks and textbooks designed for mainstream college writing classes (i.e., "Freshman English") are beginning to address these errors as more and more ESL students enroll in U.S. colleges. For instance, the most recent edition of *A Pocket Style Manual*, a popular handbook used in first-year college-writing classes, includes a whole section on "grammar concerns for multilingual writers."<sup>11</sup> Likewise, *What Every Multilingual Student Should Know About Writing for Col-*

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*lege* identifies the "top ten" errors made by ESL writers.<sup>12</sup> Both handbooks focus on language issues involving vocabulary, verb tense, articles, parts of speech, and prepositions, areas of English that ESL writers commonly find challenging.

Most ESL writers who attend mainstream college classes have demonstrated English proficiency by either completing an on-campus ESL program or by passing a language proficiency test such as the TOEFL. Why, then, do ESL writers still make "ESL" errors in their writing, sometimes to such a degree that the overall effectiveness of their written work is compromised?

Dana Ferris, who has devoted her career as a TESOL scholar to studying ESL writing errors, cites research showing that "error is a natural part of language acquisition . . . it may even signal progress rather than deficiency

. . . [and] language acquisition takes time and requires both effort and patience."<sup>13</sup> Research also shows that students who are given the time to develop the skill to edit their own work (rather than having each error marked by an instructor) will become more proficient over time.<sup>14</sup>

In short, ESL writers need opportunities to make errors and to discover and remedy these errors on their own. This is true even if such students have scored well on the TOEFL or have successfully completed an ESL program. Despite having developed a strong foundation in English, they still need ongoing practice to develop their skills. College educators who see ESL writing errors as a natural part of the learning process and consequently give ESL writers the space to make errors—primarily by encouraging self-correction of errors and giving students the chance to edit and revise written work even after it has been turned in and graded—serve these students well.

### Cultivating a Culture of Success

By better understanding ESL student backgrounds, how and why these students produce the writing they do, and how and why they continue to make certain errors in their writing, educators can begin to cultivate a culture of success for ESL writers in their classes. This article concludes with four suggestions of cultivating this culture of success.

- **Look beyond the ESL-mainstream divide.** The terms "ESL" and "mainstream" may appear to only be a practical means for categorization, but these labels can reinforce the problematic idea that "mainstream" students are the core group while the "ESL" students are a peripheral part of the class. Educators who recognize that ESL students are a diverse, legitimate, and *numerous* part of the core group can begin to see them less and less as "ESL" and more and more as biology students or engineering students, future teachers or dentists,

daughters and sons, sisters and brothers, and God's children. That is, individuals with real lives and specific learning needs who are equipped and willing to work hard and succeed in class just as the "mainstream" students are. Individuals whom God loves. Indeed, seeing beyond the "ESL" label is part of a Christ-centered approach to teaching, an approach that reflects the values at the heart of any Seventh-day Adventist institution.

• **Avoid defining ESL writers by the errors they make.** Some ESL students make a lot of errors in their writing; others do not. Many of the errors they make are different from the errors made by native English speakers. But to assume all ESL writers will make the same kinds of errors, and that they will also make a lot of these errors is to generalize that ESL students are part of a predictable, homogeneous group. Educators who can distinguish between serious writing errors and minor ones and who give ESL students the space to make errors—and self-correct them—can help them develop much-needed confidence. More importantly, educators who define students not by their writing errors but by their individual backgrounds, their academic interests, and the thoughts and ideas that come through in their writing despite a few (or many) errors, play a successful role in furthering these students' English-language development and achieve the primary objective of effectively teaching these students the assigned subject matter.

• **Be explicit about writing assignment expectations.** When educators give writing assignments, they often assume that students know what a "short response essay" is, what an "argument paper" should do, and what a "10-page research paper" should look like. Chances are, however, many students—including those who are native speakers of English—have only a partial understanding of the teacher's expectations. Educators can therefore help all of their students by being explicit in a number of ways: Before making each assignment, they should provide clear directions, describe the specific learning goals, present the grading rubric to be used, share examples of successful assignments from previous classes, and highlight unique organizational expectations for the particular assignment genre. They should also give students a chance to revise and further edit writing for credit after it has been initially submitted, graded, and returned.

• **Reach out to the on-campus ESL program.** A final suggestion for educators is to reach out to the on-campus ESL program, if there is one, for guidance when struggling with especially challenging ESL writing issues. These programs are staffed by professionals who work with ESL writers on a daily basis. In fact, these ESL instructors probably know many of the ESL students taking mainstream classes and can offer help that is tailored to their needs. Working with the on-campus ESL program can also help college educators better understand the second-language acquisition process, replace unrealistic expectations about this process with realistic ones, and form partnerships with ESL professionals that will serve the best interests of ESL writers across the campus. ✍

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#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Research in second-language acquisition, notably the work of Jim Cummins at the University of Toronto, shows that developing basic conversational proficiency in a second language takes less time than developing academic proficiency in a second language, with the latter taking many years. Acquiring native-like ability in a second language may also take many years and probably will never entirely happen. Since on-campus college ESL programs often only have a few semesters or quarters, at most, to work with ESL students, the goal of these programs is typically to help them develop a solid foundation in grammar, aural/oral skills, reading for academic purposes, and writing for academic purposes, with the understanding that upon meeting a certain threshold of success, these students will move into mainstream classes and further develop their English-language skills as they pursue their academic degrees.

2. This article uses the term "ESL" to describe English-language learners of all backgrounds who study in mainstream U.S. college classes and are still developing English-language skills; the term includes but is not limited to students who have also studied in ESL programs. While there are other descriptors used for English-language learners (for instance, "ELL" for English-language learner and "L2 student" for second-language student), "ESL" is arguably the most widely understood and recognized term used to categorize English-language learners in U.S. higher-learning contexts. Hence, "ESL" is used in this article. At the same time, it is important to realize that the term "ESL" can have a stigmatizing effect if it is used as the primary means of identifying a student, especially when a student demonstrates fluency in English but is still regarded as an "ESL" student by peers and instructors. For a more detailed discussion of this point, see the first teaching suggestion in this article.

3. Open Doors (2016): <http://www.iie.org/opendoors>.

4. Joy Reid, "'Eye' Learners and 'Ear' Learners: Identifying the Language Needs of International Students and U.S. Resident Writers," in *Second-Language Writing in the Composition Classroom: A Critical Sourcebook*, Paul Kei Matsuda, et al., eds. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2006), 79.

5. *Ibid.*, 77.

6. Ilona Leki, *Understanding ESL Writers: A Guide for Teachers* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook, 1992), 43.

7. Robert B. Kaplan, "Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-cultural Education," *Language Learning* 16:1-2 (1966): 1-20.

8. *Ibid.*

9. John Hinds, "Reader vs. Writer Responsibility: A New Typology," in *Writing Across Languages: Analysis of L2 Texts*, Ulla Connor and Robert Kaplan, eds. (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1987), 141-152.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Diana Hacker and Nancy Sommers, *A Pocket Style Manual*, 7th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2016), 47-56.

12. Shanti Bruce and Alan S. Kennedy, *What Every Multilingual Writer Should Know About Writing for College* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson, 2012), 52-59.

13. Dana R. Ferris, *Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: The University of Michigan Press, 2002), 86.

14. *Ibid.*, 85-95.