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Reading an ESL Writer's Text*

Paul Kei Matsuda and Michelle Cox

In this chapter, we discuss the part of a writing center conference that is at the center of the conferencing process—the reading of the writer's draft. Although the process of reading may be the least visible part of the conference, it is one of the most important because it is during this process that tutors begin to formulate their initial responses to the text. In many cases, reading texts written by English as a second language (ESL) writers is not radically different from reading those written by native English-speaking (NES) writers; tutors can use many of the same principles and strategies they use in reading NES texts. Yet, because ESL writers often come from different linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds, some aspects of ESL writers' texts may stand out, especially to the eyes of native English speakers who do not have extensive background in working with ESL writers.

Some of the initial reactions to ESL writers' texts may be quite positive. Inexperienced readers of ESL texts may be fascinated by details about the ESL writer's native language, culture, or country, or stories of how they or their family came to the United States. Some may be intrigued by the extensive use of metaphors and figurative language in some ESL writers' texts. Others may be amazed by how much the writers have accomplished with a language they did not grow up with. Unfortunately, not all encounters with ESL texts produce such generous responses. Readers with little or no experience in working with ESL writers may be drawn to surface-level errors and differences that they see as problematic.

Readers may find differences between NES and ESL writers' texts at various levels—from word formation to sentence structure to organization. The texts may contain many errors, such as missing articles, "wrong" prepositions and verb endings, and unusual sentence structures that "just don't sound right."

* We thank Aya Matsuda and Kate Tirabassi for their critical and helpful comments and suggestion on an earlier version of this chapter.

The word choices may seem odd, or the use of idiomatic phrases may seem inappropriate. The organization of the text may not resemble what native English-speaking readers might expect. The thesis statement may be missing or located in places where the reader does not expect to find it, such as near the end of the paper. In a persuasive writing assignment, the writer's stance may not be clear. For a research paper assignment, the writer may have written a paper filled with allusive references without citing the sources.

Because of these and other differences, ESL writing is sometimes seen as "deficient," especially when it is evaluated in comparison with texts produced by NES writers. In "Toward an Understanding of the Distinct Nature of L2 Writing," Tony Silva synthesized research studies comparing ESL and NES writers and writing. The picture of ESL writers and their texts that emerged from the synthesis was overwhelmingly negative: Second language (L2) writing is "simpler and less effective (in the eyes of L1 [first language] readers) than L1 writing"; composing in an L2 is "more constrained, more difficult, and less effective"; "L2 writers' texts are less fluent (fewer words), less accurate (more errors), and less effective (lower holistic scores)."¹ As Silva points out, however, it may be unreasonable to use the same criteria to evaluate ESL texts and NES texts. Based on the findings of his review, Silva suggests the need to ask questions such as: "When does different become incorrect or inappropriate? and What is good enough?"²

It is important to realize that differences are not necessarily signs of deficiency. In fact, some of the differences may reflect the writer's advanced knowledge of conventions in other languages or in specific English discourse communities including disciplines with which the tutor may not be familiar. Yet, readers may find the differences distracting when, for example, the text contains certain kinds of errors or too many errors, or when the text is organized in ways that do not match a reader's understanding of the particular genre or other conventions. In some cases, the tutor may be drawn to those differences so strongly that they feel lost or frustrated; they may even feel unqualified to work with ESL writers. The initial fear that some tutors have in working with ESL writers is not insurmountable. Becoming familiar with some of the characteristics of ESL texts and their sources can help tutors work with ESL writers with more confidence, read beyond the differences, and recognize the strengths of those texts more easily.

Understanding ESL Writers' Texts

ESL writers and their texts vary widely from individual to individual and from situation to situation, and overgeneralization should be avoided. Still, it is useful to understand some of the general characteristics of many ESL writers' texts and various sources of influence. One of the important factors is the ESL writer's second-language proficiency. Many ESL writers are still in the process of developing the intuitive understanding of the English language—its structure

and use—and for that reason, they may not be able to produce grammatical sentences as easily as NES writers can. As pointed out in the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Statement on Second-Language Writing and Writers, "the acquisition of a second language and second-language literacy is a time-consuming process that will continue through students' academic careers and beyond. . . . Furthermore, most second-language writers are still in the process of acquiring syntactic and lexical competence—a process that will take a lifetime."³ Because ESL writers often have not internalized some of the rules of grammar, they are often not able to identify errors on their own by, for example, reading the text aloud.

Although language proficiency affects the overall quality of ESL texts, the relationship between language proficiency and writing proficiency is not simple; the ability to speak English does not necessarily correspond directly with the quality of texts they produce.⁴ Even ESL writers who do not seem to be able to communicate their thoughts in spoken English may be able to write prose that puts many NES writers to shame. This is the case with some international students who have learned English mostly through the medium of writing. Other students are more fluent in spoken English—they may be familiar with a wide variety of colloquial and idiomatic expressions—but they may still produce texts that do not seem to reflect the high level of their spoken fluency. This is typical of so-called "Generation 1.5 writers"—ESL students who have lived in an English-dominant society for a number of years and acquired English primarily through spoken interactions. Needless to say, these are extreme cases; most ESL writers fall somewhere in between.

ESL writers' texts are also shaped in part by their prior experiences with literacy. While some ESL writers may have received extensive instruction in writing, others have been schooled in educational systems that did not focus on composition. Some ESL writers are highly experienced—even published—writers in other languages; others have not received instruction in writing beyond the sentence level. Some ESL writers may even be native speakers of a language that does not have a written form. Research on contrastive rhetoric suggests that writers' linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds may influence texts in various ways as "the nature and functions of discourse, audience, and persuasive appeals often differ across linguistic, cultural and educational contexts."⁵

It is important to remember that these generalizations do not apply to all ESL students, and that not all differences can be attributed to differences in ESL writers' native language or cultural background. The lack of organization in some ESL texts, as Bernard Mohan and Winnie Au-Yeung Lo have pointed out, may be a result of the overemphasis on grammar in some educational systems.⁶ International students, who learn English as a foreign language while in their native country, may have been taught how to compose English sentences but not necessarily entire compositions. As Carol Severino points out in "The 'Doodles' in Context," "organization is often the last feature to be taught and

learned in both first- and second-language writing, if it is taught at all.”⁷ Experience with composing grammatical sentences, however, does not lead directly to the ability to compose full compositions.

Ways of Reading Difference

In “The Sociopolitical Implications of Response to Second Language and Second Dialect Writing,” Carol Severino draws on Min-Zhan Lu’s framework in describing three stances that readers can take when responding to ESL texts: assimilationist, accommodationist, and separatist. When a reader takes an assimilationist stance, the reader’s goal is to help the ESL writer “write linear, thesis-statement and topic-sentence-driven, error-free, and idiomatic English as soon as possible,”⁸ encouraging the writer and their text to assimilate into the dominant culture. The assimilationist, then, reads differences as deficiencies—errors to be corrected.

Readers who take an accommodationist stance may also try to teach the NES norm, but their goal is different from that of the assimilationist. The accommodationist reader’s goal is to help the writer learn new discourse patterns without completely losing the old, so that the writer can maintain both their L1 and L2 linguistic and cultural identities. The accommodationist, then, reads differences as, well, differences, explaining to the writer how some differences may be seen as deficiencies by some readers; it is up to the writer “how much like a native speaker” he wants to sound.⁹

When readers take a separatist stance, their goal is farther away from the assimilationist goal of teaching ESL writers to write like NES writers. The separatist reader’s goal is to support the writer in maintaining separate linguistic and cultural identities, and to advocate for NES readers to read ESL texts “generously” with more appreciation for multicultural writing. The separatist, then, reads to overlook, and therefore preserve, difference.

The stances come down to ways of reading difference, and whether tutors should read to “correct” difference, explain difference, or overlook difference. Severino provides three scenarios, showing how she, when conferencing in the writing center, shifted between stances in relation to the writers’ goals and situations. When working with Takaro, a Generation 1.5 student, Severino took an accommodationist approach, focusing first on what Takaro was communicating through the writing, explaining how rhetorical choices are related to situation and audience. When working with Michael, a speaker of a nondominant variety of English, Severino took a separatist approach during the first few sessions—focusing on what Michael was communicating and encouraging confidence in writing—and then moved toward an accommodationist approach later, to help Michael see how various audiences would read his writing.

In each case, Severino steered clear of the assimilationist stance. She had felt tempted to take this stance after first reading Michael’s writing, as she felt “stunned” by the number of errors in the text. However, she resisted the urge in

order to remain consistent with the writing center pedagogy. Instead, she “responded to his piece as an act of communication, which it was, rather than as a demonstration of how well Michael knew and/or could apply the rules.”¹⁰

Inexperienced readers of ESL texts tend to lean toward the assimilationist approach out of their desire to help ESL writers. In doing so, however, they inadvertently read difference as deficiency. As the reader makes the effort to move away from the deficiency model, however, they become more open to understanding their own responses to ESL writing and to learning from the writer. Today, many second-language writing specialists advocate for a broader definition of what counts as “good writing,” urging NES readers to see “accented English” as part of that spectrum. In *Understanding ESL Writers*, Ilona Leki writes:

ESL students can become very fluent writers of English, but they may never become indistinguishable from a native speaker, and it is unclear why they should. A current movement among ESL writing teachers is to argue that, beyond a certain level of proficiency in English writing, it is not the students’ texts that need to change; rather it is the native-speaking readers and evaluators (particularly in educational institutions) that need to learn to read more broadly, with a more cosmopolitan and less parochial eye.¹¹

According to Leki, the assimilationist goal of making ESL writing indistinguishable from NES writing is unrealistic. In many cases, the assimilationist stance is also undesirable because it leads to the imposition of the norms of dominant U.S. academic discourse as well as various cultural values that comes with it.

Resisting the Assimilationist Stance

Those who take the assimilationist stance do not always have malicious intent. As Severino suggests, people who take the assimilationist stance often do so in order to “smoothly blend or melt [the ESL writer and their text] into the desired discourse communities and avoid social stigma by controlling any features that[,] in the eyes of audiences with power and influence[,] might mark a writer as inadequately educated or lower class.”¹² In other words, the assimilationist stance may be an attempt to protect the ESL writer from other readers—especially those readers who have institutional authority over ESL writers. Tutors may feel the same responsibility, and may try to represent what they consider to be the possible response from the intended audience of the ESL writer’s text: the professor.

Sometimes ESL writers come into the writing center because they were told by their professors to visit the writing center to get their drafts “cleaned up” or to work on their “grammar.” From these experiences with professors’ reactions to ESL writing, tutors may believe that professors tend to be assimilationists. While there are professors who do approach ESL students with

assimilationist intentions, several error gravity studies—studies that review which errors tend to attract more attention by specific groups of readers—show that many professors are more tolerant of differences in ESL writing, or at least of certain types of differences, than of those in NES writing.

Terry Santos, for example, showed that professors were able to overlook local errors—errors that do not directly affect meaning—such as articles, prepositions, spelling, comma splices, or pronoun agreement.¹³ Studies of error gravity generally show that professors tend to react more negatively to global errors—errors that affect the comprehension of meaning—such as the wrong word choice, word order, and verb tenses.¹⁴

One of the implications of error gravity studies is that tutors may want to focus more of their attention on global errors rather than on local errors when reading ESL texts. It may not be possible to define global and local errors in terms of particular grammatical features because whether and how a particular error affects meaning depends on the context. Instead, tutors can prioritize their responses by paying attention to their own initial reactions to particular errors that seem to interfere with their understanding of the meaning of the text. As discussed in the next section, this approach applies not only to grammatical errors but also to other aspects of writing.

Reading Strategies

Though each writing center session demands different approaches, there is a general process of reading ESL writing that can be useful. It is generally a good idea to start with a quick reading of the ESL writer's text, focusing on what the writer is trying to communicate and how the paper is organized. A common practice among tutors is to ask writers to read their draft aloud during the conference, rather than the tutor read the draft silently. This strategy is often effective for NES writers who can use their intuitive sense of the grammar and the flow of English to assess their own writing. Many ESL writers, however, have not developed that intuitive sense of the English language. For many ESL writers, reading their paper out loud may shift their attention to the pronunciation of the English language—a proficiency separate from writing in English.

It may be more helpful for the ESL writer to hear the tutor read the paper out loud—to note when the reader stumbles, pauses, fills in missing articles and modifiers, or reads smoothly. The interpretation of meaning that takes place in the process of reading aloud “rhetorically with feeling and meaning” may also help the tutor identify where the writer's intended meaning is not clear to the tutor.¹⁵ Yet, on the first reading, especially if the number of errors prevents the tutor from reading aloud without stumbling too often, it may be more effective for the tutor to read silently, which gives the reader time to sort through meaning.

Sometimes less experienced readers of ESL texts get so overwhelmed by the sheer number of errors that they have to give up on the draft and stop reading

somewhere in the middle of the paper. However, if a paper isn't read to the end, the reader may miss out on information that could clarify the meaning or organization of the paper. The point of the paper may not become clear until the end if the text is organized inductively. Questions that arise in the tutor's mind while reading the beginning of the paper may be answered toward the end. Reading a piece of ESL writing in full allows the reader to come to an understanding of how the paper is organized on its own terms. Reading to the end of a piece of ESL writing is only beneficial if the reader can suspend judgment while reading—reading past variations in sentence structure, waiting to see how the writer will pull the paper together, maintaining an open mind when the writer's opinions and beliefs vary substantially from the tutor's.

Another feature of some ESL writing that may be disorienting is the lack of meta-discourse or signposts—the transitional words and sentences that move readers between ideas, and the structures that mark the organization of a text. Even though a text may not have an organization that is immediately recognizable, there may be an organization at work. The trick is to identify and piece together the logic that is not immediately apparent to the reader by formulating questions with the assumption that there is logic in it—by giving the writer the benefit of the doubt.

After reading the whole text for the gist, it is often a good idea to reread the text, this time placing brief marks—such as checkmarks or stars—near features or details that seem surprising or those that jar the reading process: the unexpected. It is the unexpected in ESL writing that can make reading ESL writing challenging, as it demands tutors become more aware of their tacit expectations for style, rhetorical choices, genre conventions, and relationships to audience. But it is also the unexpected that can teach tutors the most about their own responses to writing. Teachers often call the unexpected occurrences that happen in the classroom “teachable moments”—moments where significant learning could occur. It may be helpful to think of the unexpected in ESL writing with the same positive twist.

To capitalize on the unexpected, the tutor needs to be aware of his or her own responses as a reader. For instance, if a particular passage seems disorienting, the reader can take advantage of this situation by focusing on where he or she started feeling lost and why. What in the text caused the reader to wander? What is it about the reader's own expectations that contributed to the feeling of disorientation? The reader should also focus on areas where he or she feels “stuck”—unable to generate meaning from the text—and use this experience as an opportunity to consider what would be needed to move forward in the reading process. Does the reader need to ask the writer a question? Does the reader need to mark the area and then move on with reading, in the hope that another section of the paper will help the reader negotiate the challenging section?

Some of the unexpected features of ESL writing may be rich cultural details or unique perspectives that students bring with them. Making note of

those details or perspectives that are particularly interesting or insightful to the tutor is useful in encouraging the ESL writer. Sometimes, however, readers of ESL texts can get distracted by their own curiosity about certain details, such as descriptions of unfamiliar places, cultures, and ways of thinking. While these details do make ESL writing compelling to read, they can also lead the tutor away from the writer's goals and more toward their own goals, which could include asking the writer about their cultures or experiences, leading the reader to become more a tourist than a tutor.

People always pay attention to *how* I say things, and never listen to *what* I say.
—an undergraduate ESL student

In this chapter we have suggested that, while ESL writers' texts may have features that are distinct from NES writers' texts due to many sources of influence, it is possible to read beyond the differences if the tutor can suspend judgments, focus on meaning, and be aware of their own preferences and biases. Ultimately, reading is an act of communication—the act of listening to what the writer has to say. When we listen—truly listen—we treat ESL writers with the respect they deserve, regarding them as peers rather than as uninformed learners of the English language and the U.S. culture. It is only in such an atmosphere of mutual respect that the collaborative pedagogy of the writing center can turn differences into opportunities for growth both for the reader and the writer.

Notes

1. Silva, 668.
2. Silva, 670.
3. CCCC Committee on Second Language Writing, 669–70.
4. Cumming, 81–141.
5. CCCC Committee, 670.
6. Mohan and Lo (1985).
7. Severino (1993a), 47.
8. Severino (1993b), 187.
9. Severino (1993b), 189.
10. Severino (1993b), 194.
11. Leki, 132–33.
12. Severino (1993b), 187.
13. Santos, 81.
14. Santos, 81; Vann, Meyer, and Lorenz, 432.
15. Severino (1993b), 190.

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Avoiding Appropriation

Carol Severino

When I was studying Intermediate Italian in a study-abroad program in Italy, I wrote for our last assignment a brief essay “Un Viaggio a Venezia” about a trip to Venice I had taken some weeks before. In my simple syntax and vocabulary, I explained the theme of my mini travel essay: despite the fact that we travelers—four students, another professor, and I—had conflicting interests and itineraries, we managed to negotiate and compromise so each person could do or see one thing she wanted to. We managed to shop for jewelry, masks, and shoes, feed the pigeons on St. Mark’s Square, eat pizza by the Grand Canal, and watch the parade of boats in celebration of the Feast of the Redeemer. I was proud of my composition because I felt I had successfully communicated a complex travel experience in a foreign language I had studied for less than a year.

The day after I returned to the United States, I received a friendly e-mail from my Italian teacher saying he had read and enjoyed my essay and had made just “a few corrections.” When I opened the attachment and read my essay, I realized that not only had he taken the time to type directly in my handwritten essay, but he had, in fact, typed in a different essay—a more accurate and sophisticated one with vocabulary and verb tenses I did not know how to use yet. It was still more or less my experience in Venice, but now more in my teacher’s language and my teacher’s voice. For example, my original opening sentence had read, in translation:

Trips to foreign cities are always a challenge, but when there are many travelers, the challenges become greater.

The revised sentence now read:

Trips in foreign lands are always challenging, but when the travelers are many, the challenges multiply.

At the time I didn’t know how to say either “challenging” or “multiply.” I had also written, rather clumsily, “*Before the trip I had read my guidebook with a*

map,” but in the new version, “*I had read my tourist guide and took a look at the topographical map.”* Almost every sentence was changed and elevated to a higher register. I wondered if my original wordings were grammatically incorrect or just not as native- and mature-sounding as these new, improved ones. Perhaps my well-meaning, hard-working Italian teacher thought that it was inappropriate for a middle-aged American professor to sound like a grade-schooler. Realizing that his embarrassment for me might have motivated his editing, I felt ashamed of myself and the quantity and quality of his changes. Humbling second-language writing experiences such as this one (I have had many others) have enabled me to identify with the feelings of ESL writers who may also have overzealous teachers and tutors.

Reformulation and Appropriation

Helpful and generous as he was, my Italian teacher had revised my writing so it no longer sounded like me or reflected the state of my second language learning at the time. Ironically, I liked my original simple and nonidiomatic style; my hybrid Italian American voice expressed who I was and what I knew. On the other hand, I continue to learn from his edits; whenever I reread my transformed essay, I reinforce the authentic native expressions that real Italians use. The intent of my teacher’s “few corrections,” after all, was not to humble or discourage me, but to teach me the authentic Italian I needed to replace my interlanguage “Inglesiano.”

Such language learning is the main justification for the teaching strategy that Andrew Cohen calls *reformulation* that my teacher used.¹ Recommended as an optional tutoring strategy for English a second language (ESL) students, reformulation means correcting and revising second language writing, making it not only more grammatical, but more idiomatic and native-sounding. Reformulating, in effect, involves “native-speaker-izing” second language writing—changing the wording so that the writing sounds more like first language writing. To be accurate in our discussion, though, we should posit a continuum of second and first language writing instead of thinking in terms of two different poles: L1 versus L2 writing. In this case, reformulation would be reducing a lesser to greater number of second language features by replacing them with a lesser to greater number of native language features. Thus, reformulation ranges from slight to extensive.

For example, here is a sentence that Satomi, an ESL writer working in our writing center, wrote in her personal essay about calligraphy for her Rhetoric class:

It is said that in Japan to write own names well is to represent how intelligent people are.

Many options exist for revising Satomi’s sentence—from correcting the only actual grammar error (*one’s* own name versus *own names*) to reformulating

and “naturalizing” the sentence with gerunds and eliminating the copula “is” and infinitive “to represent”:

It is said in Japan that writing one's name well represents how intelligent people are.

A second further reformulation would be to use the more idiomatic expression “a sign of” that might be in Satomi’s passive but not active, working vocabulary:

It is said in Japan that writing one's name well is a sign of intelligence.

Yet a third, more extreme option would be to eliminate the passive voice expression “It is said”:

The Japanese say that writing one's name well is a sign of intelligence.

Which reformulations would we say preserve Satomi’s voice? Which distort or remove Satomi’s voice? To what extent would such a judgment about the resulting voice depend on Satomi’s input into the decisions of whether and how much to reformulate?

On some occasions, such as with my Italian essay, or perhaps with the third option for Satomi’s sentence, when writing has been reformulated, we might evaluate the changed product as having been *appropriated*, or taken away from the student writer by the teacher, tutor, or editor. Appropriation usually involves the writer feeling, as I did when reading my Italian professor’s corrections, a loss of voice, ownership, authorship, or emotional and intellectual connection to the writing and how it was composed. Such an event—when control of a text is removed from an author who then feels alienated from it—might be considered an “act of appropriation,” although undoubtedly one can still learn language and about language use from the experience. On other occasions, however, when language has been reformulated in whole or in part by a teacher, tutor, or editor, for example, with the consent and participation of the student, we might conclude that the student’s writing has not been appropriated. What are the situational factors that influence the evaluation of an act of reformation as appropriation or not? In this chapter, after giving a brief overview of the history of appropriation, I identify and discuss some of these situational factors with the help of tutors from the University of Iowa Writing Center, all of whom work intensively with ESL students.

Some Background on Appropriation

In Composition Studies, issues of appropriation first arose in relation to native speakers of English (L1 writers) and the topics and content of their papers. As Lil Brannon and Cy Knoblauch have pointed out, teachers often wrest the direction of their students’ writing from them so that they will write about what interests the teachers instead of what interests the students. Then students are confused or demoralized by having to puzzle out their teachers’ expectations

and write to fulfill them instead of writing from their own impetus and intentions. Teachers appropriate or take over the texts of their students when they respond to their students’ papers with their own Ideal Texts in mind instead of negotiating with the students about what the students’ intentions are and how best to fulfill them.² Not only are students’ texts removed from them by teachers, but more importantly, their control over these texts. Issues of appropriation, therefore, are usually issues of control over composing and revising. Who has more control of the text—the writer or the teacher or tutor? We can probably say that the more control the tutor, teacher, or editor has over the writer’s text, the greater the likelihood of appropriation.

Control is also related to authority. Teachers take control of students’ texts because they do not accord their students or their texts the authority they grant to canonical authors and their texts, according to Brannon and Knoblauch.³ Rather than struggle to get meaning from opaque student texts as they would do with a William Faulkner or Dylan Thomas work, they assume control over those texts and over the writers themselves. Brannon and Knoblauch and others, such as Nancy Sommers⁴ and Richard Straub,⁵ have recommended that teachers relinquish some of their authority and control over the students’ texts and return it to their students, thus empowering them. They recommend that teachers act as respondents, informing students of the effects of their intentions and words on them as readers. Most tutoring guides, such as those by Toni-Lee Capossela⁶ and Paula Gillespie and Neal Lerner,⁷ also recommend that tutors not interfere with their students’ control of their texts. They advocate the tutor roles of collaborator, facilitator, coach, and consultant rather than more teacherly, controlling and directive roles of informant, editor, and evaluator.

Appropriation and Foreign and Second Language Writers

Well-meaning teachers and tutors can exert too much control over the topics, content, and development of their ESL students’ papers, although the motivation for their assuming control may be different than it is with native speakers. The motivation to control may stem from disparity in cultural knowledge; either the tutor or student may have more cultural expertise, depending on the topic of the assignment. Sometimes the assignment situation seems to demand the tutor’s directiveness. In our roles as cultural informants advocated by Judith Powers⁸ and surrogate academic audience advocated by Joy Reid,⁹ we tutors often know more about the assigned U.S. culture-bound topics of students’ papers than our ESL students do, especially if they are international students who have lived for only a short time in the United States, but must still write convincingly about U.S. culture, history, or controversies. Unless students can interpret and stretch their assignments to compare, for example, birth control and reproduction in China with those practices in the United States, they may have no other choice but to use the tutor’s background information or stance on these U.S. controversies. Sometimes it is only with the historical

context and position provided by the tutor that the student is able to make sense of the material he has gathered from researching the controversy. This kind of assignment-induced appropriation often cannot be avoided without more widespread changes; writing programs would have to allow ESL students a choice of controversies and/or provide courses with international or multicultural curricula, such as those recommended by Paul Matsuda and Tony Silva.¹⁰

Ironically, a kind of reverse cultural appropriation can also occur when the topics for writing are from the student's own culture. In Composition and ESL classes and in writing centers such as ours in which ESL students do personal writing, well-meaning teachers and tutors often urge ESL students to write about (too) familiar topics such as the Moon Festival or Chinese New Year, even when, as Ilona Leki points out, those topics might be considered stale, providing little opportunity to discover new ideas and personal meaning.¹¹ Call it the equivalent of "What I Did on My Summer Vacation."

Most commonly, the issue of appropriating second language writing in general arises not in relation to control of topic or content, but to control of language. Here the disparity is in linguistic knowledge, not cultural knowledge; the linguistic repertoire of a tutor who is a native speaker of the language is far greater than that of her students. My Italian teacher was much more likely to exert control over my Italian phrasing than he was to ask or require me to write on a trip to Florence, or on an American holiday such as the Fourth of July. As a result of his elevating my style in the direction of his Ideal Text, some of my voice was sacrificed for increased vocabulary or, more precisely, passive vocabulary, because I cannot guarantee I will use those new expressions correctly when I try them in different contexts in the future.

The Trade-Off Between Voice and Authentic Language

I felt that some of the language of my travel essay had been appropriated and some of my voice was lost because I was satisfied with sounding like an American English speaker and Intermediate Italian learner in this foreign language situation; I had become accustomed to reading my personal writing in L1 or L2 in a possibly self-indulgent manner—as if I were looking in a mirror. Thus, as I read my work, I expected to see and hear myself, not someone else.

Yet my situation as a foreign language learner and writer is unquestionably different from a second language situation with a second language learner and writer. I was simply writing mini travel essays, not studying in a degree program, taking rigorous humanities and social and natural sciences in Italian, and competing with Italian native speakers writing research papers, exams, and dissertations. With these pressures and challenges, more ESL writers may be more willing to trade some of their voice for accuracy, idiomaticity, and increased language learning. If I as a tutor had made the equivalent changes in the essay of an ESL student in the writing center, would she also feel as if I had appropriated it? Probably not—if she had expressed the desire to sound as

native as possible, if she had participated in making the changes, and if I had done my best to explain why particular expressions were ungrammatical or unidiomatic. What had contributed to my sense of appropriation was not only my satisfaction with sounding nonnative, but also my not understanding the reasons for my teacher's changes and my lack of participation and control in making them.

Avoiding Appropriation

We can identify from these discussions the situational factors that can contribute to avoiding appropriation in tutoring ESL students in the writing center. When and how are we more likely to avoid appropriation? Paralleling the discussion of the continuum of second and first language writing features, appropriation should also be discussed in terms of probabilities and of gradations on a continuum of tutor and writer control and directiveness, as Straub recommends,¹² and not in terms of absolutes. It is not always clear—to a tutor or even to an outside observer such as a researcher—when appropriation has taken place, except possibly when a writer thinks and feels at a gut level that it has. If the notion of "appropriation" is applied in a judgmental fashion every time a tutor suggests changing an expression on an ESL student's paper and replacing it with a more idiomatic one—a labeling that Reid calls a "myth of appropriation,"¹³ it will cause unnecessary tutor anxiety, paralysis, and guilt and the term will ultimately lose its meaning.

To avoid appropriation, then, tutors should strive to do the following:

1. Accord the ESL writer authority. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if we accord ESL students authority as fluent, proficient speakers of, and writers in their own native languages and advanced speakers and writers in English who may know more about the rules of English syntax, grammar, and usage than we do. When we compare their proficiency in English with ours in our L2, we can gain an appreciation and admiration for their amazing achievements. By respecting their authority as bilingual speakers and writers, as knowledgeable students of their disciplines, and as cultural informants about their own native languages and cultures, we are less likely to assume control of their texts and impose our Ideal ones.

2. Work on higher-order concerns (HOCs) before lower-order concerns (LOCs). We are more likely to avoid appropriating language and voice if we adhere to the principle of higher-order concerns versus lower-order concerns recommended by Donald McAndrew and Thomas Reigstad.¹⁴ The assignment, focus, argument, development, and organization are usually more important than expression unless some language clarifications and corrections are needed simply in order to understand whether the student has followed the assignment and to understand her points. In the case of language completely obscuring

argument, the level of language would be considered a higher-order and global concern. Otherwise, there is no point in working carefully and slowly to reformulate language that should not or probably will not appear in the next draft because the student needs to refocus or revise her entire argument.

3. Address expressed needs. We are more likely to avoid appropriation when students, especially more advanced students and English learners, tell us that they want their writing to sound as much like that of native English speakers as possible. We can endlessly debate whether ESL writers *should* feel they should sound like native speakers rather than themselves, but the fact is, many do, especially advanced undergraduates and graduates, faculty, and visiting scholars; the feedback and pressure they receive from their professors, their supervisors, their dissertation advisors, and their journal editors convinces them that they need to feel this way.

As Kathy Lyons, one of the University of Iowa writing center tutors, noted, “When you factor in what’s at stake for these more advanced students (opportunities for publication, the need to write a defensible thesis, jobs), it seems wrongheaded to resist their desire to gain mastery over American writing styles. . . . In resisting the request of an ESL student to help with learning the ‘American way’ or simply the ‘standard English’ way of expression something, we might be doing a great disservice, though with the best of intentions. We should be prepared to do what’s in the student’s best interest and to allow her to learn what she feels is important to her own professional and/or educational advancement if that is what she is asking us to do.”

However, shouldn’t we work to convince the gatekeepers in graduate and professional schools and in academic departments and on editorial boards that second language writers will probably always write with an accent? We should support the efforts the field of second language writing has made, such as the Conference on College Composition and Communication’s resolution¹⁵ to educate teachers about the length of the second language writing acquisition process and how, according to Virginia Collier, it takes at least seven years to acquire an academic vocabulary.¹⁶ (See Chapter 4 for more about this.) However, until teachers and other gatekeepers are sufficiently educated and become more tolerant of accents and nonnative features in writing, some ESL students will ask to be taught how a native English speaker would say what they suspect they are saying awkwardly. Such requests might put pressure on a hands-off tutor into taking what I have called a more assimilationist stance, so that the student’s writing will blend better into the linguistic mainstream of American Academic English.¹⁷

YiYun Li, a Chinese English bilingual writing center tutor at the University of Iowa, creative writer published in *The New Yorker*, and former microbiologist, is similar to Lyons when it comes to responding to students’ expressed needs. Her perspective as an ESL writer who has both tutored and been tutored is especially valuable. “As an ESL student myself, I understand that students

really hope to learn the most correct English from our tutors. I remember in our writing center class last year, we talked about whether we should want our students to write like Americans. The concern was that they would love their uniqueness. But a lot of times, this uniqueness is just what makes them uncomfortable about their own writings. For myself, I usually ask my readers to point out all things that sound unusual for a native speaker. Some of them I know I have put in intentionally to give the writing a little foreign-ness, but with others, I just don’t know *the right ways*, and I always feel happy to learn how to say them right.”

Writer-tutors like YiYun would want tutors to point out instances of inadvertent or intentional poetry in their writing so they can decide whether they want to leave them in their texts or reformulate them. Such writers want control over when they are sounding foreign or even, ironically, when they are sounding inappropriately colloquial—for example, when they are using the word *stuff* incorrectly or overusing it to try to sound like native English speakers. If their writing contains foreign features, they want to know it is because of a conscious decision on their part, not an accident or a result of not knowing an expression or idiom. In this case, the ESL writer paradoxically has control over the tutoring situation even when it seems that the tutor has more control over the writer’s language. What might seem like appropriation to an outsider unfamiliar with the expressed needs of the writer is actually a balanced tutorial interaction.

If tutors are not sure how unique or how much like native English speakers their students want to sound, they should ask them rather than guess. They should have a frank discussion of the pros and cons of leaning toward either pole. Such meta-discourse—communicating about how to communicate—is probably the most significant way to avoid appropriation. For confusing passages, tutors can generate with the student’s help two or three options that vary in idiomaticity, style, or register and ask the student to choose among them, as in the previous options for revising Satomi’s sentence.

4. Select particular passages to work on. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if we prioritize and select passages from a student’s writing to revise. Because there may not be time in one tutoring session and because it could be cognitively overwhelming for both tutor and student to reformulate all nonnative constructions, a few should be chosen, particularly:

- global problems that interfere with meaning, as Muriel Harris and Tony Silva recommend¹⁸ (See also Chapters 6 and 7.)
- nonidiomatic passages about which the student expresses concern
- features that are ungrammatical rather than just nonidiomatic

5. Ask writers to participate in reformulation decisions. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if students actively participate in the reformulation

and revision process and more importantly, in the meta-discourse about the process. According to the Interaction Hypothesis, such participation is said to increase the chance that language learning takes place, as Jennifer Ritter points out.¹⁹ Even if ESL students request a reformulation of their paper, when a tutor revises *for* them rather than *with* them, it is possible that that tutor crosses the line, as Molly Wingate says,²⁰ into appropriating the students' texts. University of Iowa tutor LuAnn Dvorak tells students who pressure her to change all incorrect or nonidiomatic features that they will not learn if she fixes everything for them; there is just too much new language in new contexts, she explains, for them to process in too little time and with too little participation on their part.

One common way for the student to participate is to read her own paper aloud and stop or put a check mark when she thinks a passage does not communicate well because it is ungrammatical, unnatural, or both. The tutor might stop her when he does not understand a passage to ask her if she can explain it. Another way for the student to participate more is for tutors to participate less, thus balancing the interaction. To establish this balance, we need to monitor the ways in which we are participating. Megan Knight, another University of Iowa writing center tutor, tries to limit herself to asking ESL students questions and mirroring what they have said.

6. Use speaking-into-writing strategies. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if we use speaking-into-writing techniques that utilize the student's direct spoken language. This helps to capture and preserve his voice. Marilyn Abildskov, a former University of Iowa tutor and now a creative writing professor, says that "Tell me more" is the best question tutors can ask to elicit both participation and content for writing and to reflect the writer's voice. "Tell-me-more" questions about expression cause the student to clarify her intended meaning and often result in language that is clearer and more idiomatic than what is on the page. Working from reading aloud and from speaking in order to rephrase written passages is what University of Iowa tutor John Winzenburg calls the "outside-in approach." In contrast, "the inside-out approach," he says, is when the ESL writer is concentrating on how she thinks she should write rather than on what she is trying to say. By having the student verbalize and converse to find and revise written language, University of Iowa tutor Jen Ryan says she ensures that the voice on the page is not an English voice or, for example, a Chinese voice, but the student's voice.

7. Explain the recommended changes. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if we offer brief explanations for why the student's passage is faulty and why our recommended changes are better, rather than just writing or typing them on the page. If the feature is based on a rule and the tutor can explain the rule, then this provides an opportunity for learning and carries over to the next writing rather than just repairing that one expression. For example, I would tell Satomi that the words "own _____" are preceded by a

possessive adjective: *my own car, one's own name*. Why this word or expression and not that? Why should we say two chemicals "competed" with another to bond with a third chemical rather than "contended" with one another? Look up both words in the dictionary together to learn the connotations and contexts. Why this verb form and not another? Why a gerund rather than an infinitive in the second reformulation of Satomi's sentence? The changed construction has fewer words, is more economical and streamlined, and is easier to process, even though the infinitive in the original sentence was not ungrammatical. If a tutor doesn't know the explanation, then rather than invent one, it is best to look it up together in a grammar book or ask the tutors sitting next to you. We don't have to have an explanation for every change we suggest; indeed, students may not want or need them, and there may not be enough time for them, but "this is the way we say it in English" should not be our explanation for every change or replacement.

8. Try to assess language learning. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if the student learns new language or more about using language from the interaction and reformulation. It is difficult to determine whether learning has taken place because writing centers do not test, and they often don't see the same students regularly enough to monitor their learning. Yet, tutors who find themselves correcting and explaining the same features week after week should be aware that the student is possibly not participating enough in the exchange or the explanations are not communicated well. (See Chapter 2.)

9. Avoid misrepresenting the student's language level on the page. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if our recommended changes and the resulting reformulation do not project a level of language proficiency and sophistication that is inaccurate. Intermediate ESL students should not come across as advanced on a paper after a few trips to the writing center. Ethical issues are involved in misrepresenting the student's language level to outside audiences of teachers and other gatekeepers. Such misrepresentation is unfair not only to these audiences, but to the students themselves. What if I submitted my teacher's revision of "Un Viaggio a Venezia" to an Italian program and was admitted on the basis of my supposed ability to manipulate the language, but then could not understand my courses and professors? When readers of reformulated essays compare them to the students' in-class writing and speaking, they may feel betrayed by both the students and the writing center. (See Chapter 10.)

10. Consider the type of writing. We are more likely to avoid appropriation if we gauge the purpose, genre, and type of writing we are working on with the student. Informal writing, narratives, and reader-responses may benefit more from nonidiomaticity and features of the student's unique voice; formal essays, abstracts, proposals, and dissertations may benefit less. For example, if Satomi writes in a personal essay that her hometown is "abundant of green,"

we might let it go and not comment about it at all. Or we might compliment her on her poetic phrasing, but at the same time mention that native English speakers might say “abundantly green” or “very green.” But if Satomi writes “abundant of green” to describe a land mass in a formal geography paper, we would more likely point out the lack of idiomaticity and offer the previous options. These decisions—whether to point out such instances and whether and how to change them, even in personal writing—should be negotiated with the student.

A Ten-Step Program?

Must all ten conditions be met and all the strategies implemented within a tutoring session in order to avoid appropriation? Some of these conditions and strategies are undoubtedly more significant than others. Responding to the writer’s expressed needs and feelings (#3), ensuring the writer’s participation (#5), and not misrepresenting the writer’s second language proficiency level (#9) are probably the most important criteria and advice for avoiding appropriation, although not necessarily in that order. Most important, periodic meta-communication and perception-checking about whether and how to reformulate will work to help tutors avoid taking control over ESL students’ texts and voices. Just as the travelers in my Italian essay negotiated and compromised but still met their needs and goals, so should tutors and ESL writers.

Notes

1. Cohen (1985).
2. Brannon and Knoblauch (1998).
3. Brannon and Knoblauch, 213.
4. Sommers, (1982).
5. Straub (1996).
6. Caposella (1996).
7. Gillespie and Lerner (2000).
8. Powers, (1993).
9. Reid, (1994). 273–92.
10. Matsuda and Silva (1999).
11. Leki (1992).
12. Straub, 225.
13. Reid, 290.
14. McAndrew and Reigstad, 42.
15. CCCC Statement on Second Language Writers, www/ncte.org/cccc/positions/lang2.
16. Collier (1987).
17. Severino, 190.

18. Harris and Silva (1993).
19. Ritter, 104.
20. Wingate, 9.

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“Earth Aches by Midnight”

*Helping ESL Writers Clarify Their Intended Meaning**

Amy Jo Minett

In 1993, I joined the Peace Corps and went to Hungary to teach English. And just as the commercials promise, it was a time of adventure: I stomped grapes during a harvest festival, got lost in a Transylvanian blizzard, and fell off bicycles on muddy village roads. But looking back, most vivid to me now is how I struggled to learn the language, to express myself and to make my meaning clear. It was a challenge shared every day by learners of other languages all around the world.

A story to illustrate this challenge was told to us by our Hungarian teachers. One newly arrived volunteer sat down to eat with her homestay family: they didn't speak English, nor she Hungarian, yet. Wanting to be gracious, she tried to ask what the main course—a delicious meat dish—was. Once she got her question across (through pointing, upturned palms, and a wondering tone), her homestay father smiled with delight. He lacked the vocabulary but knew the sound the animal made. “Ruff ruff,” he replied proudly. The volunteer dropped her fork. “Ruff ruff?” she asked, a little fearful. “Ruff ruff!” repeated the father, and the rest of the family chimed in. “Ruff ruff!” The volunteer hesitated, then picked up her fork and went bravely on to eat her supper. Only later did it turn out—during an elementary lesson on “what do the animals say” (the duckie, the chicken, the cow, etc.)—that in Hungarian, the pig says, “Ruff ruff!”

In this story, the volunteer leaped to what seemed a logical conclusion (same sound, even if, in Hungary, a different animal makes it). Similarly, when we struggle to understand an ESL writer's text, it is tempting to leap to conclusions about the meaning the writer wants to convey. This chapter helps

* For his many research insights and invaluable guidance with this chapter, I am indebted to Dr. Dan Tannacito of Indiana University of Pennsylvania.

avoid this pitfall, first, by helping you, the tutor, understand *why* you might not understand. You might ask the following questions.

- Has the writer tangled the syntax, as in this typical example: *But most of people feel not natural that making small talk with strangers in my country?*
- Or has the writer used sudden, strange words? One of my students once wrote, in a lovely if confusing instance, “I do not want to know the earth ache.”
- Or did the writer compose whole paragraphs of seemingly unconnected ideas, or save the thesis statement until the very end? Baffling though such texts sometimes are, in this chapter, you'll also find strategies that you can use to help English as a second language (ESL) writers clarify just what it is they want to say (and it's hard enough in a first language, right?).

First, though, let's explore *why* you may not understand an ESL writer's intended meaning. Then we'll look at how you can help clarify meaning at four levels: essay, paragraph, sentence, and word.

Clarifying the Essay's Main Idea

In 1966, Robert Kaplan published an article that dramatically changed how we understand ESL writers' texts. In it, Kaplan says that logic is not universal but culture-specific, and it's reflected in the patterns we use to organize texts in our first languages.¹ He arrives at this conclusion after studying hundreds of ESL student essays and identifying different types of development. While English essays are often linear (e.g., stating claims explicitly and then supporting those claims with evidence), essays written by Asian students may be much less direct and even withhold the thesis statement until the very end. In my experience, too, Russian, Polish, and Hungarian writers frequently hold off stating their main points until the last page—believing it creates more suspense for the reader—which is how they were taught to write. The problem, however, is that if you are accustomed to reading texts developed according to the conventional rhetorical patterns of academic English, the effects of *other* ways of structuring essays (be it Spanish, Russian, or Chinese) can cloud your understanding of an ESL writer's meaning.

Here's one rather startling example from the Budapest center in which I tutored. Magda, a Polish writer of a history paper, almost *seemed* supportive of the Nazis in the Holocaust, right up until the last paragraph, when she finally spun around and lamented the tragedy (in which members of her own family had died). When the somewhat anxious tutor asked why she had waited until the very end to make her position clear, Magda cried, “Because that's how I'd write it in Polish! It sounds best this way. Readers in Polish would *know* I wasn't siding with the Nazis!” The U.S. tutor, on the other hand, accustomed to a different pattern of essay development, was quite understandably misled

by the writer's rhetorical choice of saving her thesis until the very end. Another reader may not even have finished reading, which would have been unfortunate, as the reader would have missed the writer's main point.

If you feel that cultural differences in text organization are affecting your understanding of an ESL writer's intended meaning, you might spend some time talking directly with the writer about contrastive rhetoric. In Magda's case, the tutor asked her how arguments were typically organized in Polish, and then they explored together how essays are usually structured in English. In this way, Magda came to understand how cultural differences might shape a particular reader's understanding of the intended meaning—in this example, an U.S. reader with U.S. expectations of essay structure—and she understood what changes she needed to make to meet those expectations. For instance, her conclusion, with some tinkering, became her introduction, which made her intended meaning quite clear (and poignantly so). Equally important, as Ilona Leki says, open discussion of contrastive rhetoric can produce in ESL writers “instant enlightenment about their writing in English, as students suddenly become conscious of the implicit assumptions behind the way they construct written ideas and behind the way English does.”² Helen Fox, too, believes in talking directly with ESL writers about cultural differences in “communication styles” so that they can better understand the audience for whom they're writing, especially professors in U.S. universities who expect writing to be “so explicit and precise that they can follow the argument without any effort at all.”³ Perhaps most important such discussion also helps make clear how English conventions (and audience expectations) are, as Kaplan said, no better or worse than other conventions.⁴ They're just different.⁵ Finally, the writers' stories will be fascinating and may further put writers at ease as they become aware of what backgrounds and traditions they bring to the writing conference, and why they're not always understood.

Clarifying Paragraphs

Not only essay structure, but paragraph development, too, differs in other cultures and can blur our understanding of an ESL writer's meaning. Paragraphs might seem flip-flopped to us, as ESL writers often state the main point of the paragraph in the last sentence (as opposed to the first). John Hinds concludes that—while English writing is typically reader-friendly in its directness and clarity—Japanese writing, in contrast, is *writer*-friendly, and it's mainly the reader's job to determine the writer's intention.⁶ He describes how Japanese authors like “to give dark hints and to leave them behind nuances” and how Japanese readers “anticipate with pleasure the opportunities that such writing offers them to savor this kind of ‘mystification’ of language.”⁷

Part of this “mystification” comes from the different use of connectors like *however* or *in contrast*. While in English, we are taught to use these connectors to guide the reader explicitly through our logic (and through the ideas in our

paragraphs: can you find all the connectors in this chapter so far? Have you even noticed them as you read?), in Japanese and other languages, these “landmarks” may be absent or at least more subtle, thereby demanding the reader be more active and work harder to understand the writer's meaning.⁸ For someone who is used to reader-friendly English, understanding the meaning in such texts may feel like driving in a strange city without street signs or a road map. We want the writer to tell us exactly where to go. We want coherence and cohesion.

One strategy you can use to help ESL writers whose paragraphs aren't coherent (and whose meaning is therefore unclear) is called *topical structure analysis* (but don't be put off by the name. The strategy is easy).⁹ With it, writers are able to look at both global coherence (what the whole text is about) and local cohesion (how sentences “build meaning” by connecting to each other and to the text as a whole).¹⁰

In its simplest form, topical structure analysis works like this. Start by asking ESL writers to find sentence topics (what the sentence is about) in individual sentences. I might offer a sentence of my own, such as “Writing poetry is like meditation to me.” Writers should underline “writing poetry” as the topic.

Next, ask them to find and underline the sentence topics in whole paragraphs and then discuss the relationship between the topics and the paragraph, and the paragraph and the whole essay. In so doing, writers should discover (1) different ways that sentence topics build meaning, and (2) that the reader's ability to understand the meaning depends in part on how the topics in the paragraph progress.¹¹ Here are examples I've used to help writers understand.

1. Parallel Progression:

“Writing is often a struggle. It can also be a joy. Writing poetry, for example, feels like meditation to me.”

Here the writer can see that the meaning of the underlined topics (writing, it, writing poetry) is the same. The main idea of the paragraph (writing) remains absolutely clear to the reader (though too much progression of this type may lead to monotony).

2. Sequential Progression:

“My room is undoubtedly the messiest in the house. Books and papers are scattered everywhere. My clothes lie about in sad piles. Anyone entering does so at their own risk. My brother, for instance, last week tripped on a bean-bag chair and broke his foot.”

In this example, the topics are all different (my room, books and papers, my clothes, anyone entering, my brother), though the meaning usually comes from the previous sentence. Clearly, too much development of this type can disorient the reader, a point which ESL writers quickly come to understand when they see how, as in this example, the writer goes off on one dizzying tangent after another and sentence topics continually shift and change.¹²

3. Extended Parallel Progression:

“My room is undoubtedly the messiest in the house. Books and papers are scattered everywhere. My clothes lie about in sad piles. My room is a disaster.”

Here we find the last sentence returning neatly to the first topic (my room, books and papers, my clothes, my room). In this way, the main idea is developed in detail but then restated again directly, which helps the reader understand the main focus of the passage. The paragraph is clear and coherent.

Once ESL writers get the hang of finding and analyzing progressions in sentence topics, you can ask them to “test” how coherent their own writing is by diagramming *their* underlined sentence topics, like this:

Parallel Progression

1. Writing
2. It
3. Writing poetry

Sequential Progression

1. My room
 2. Books and papers
 3. My clothes
 4. Anyone entering
 5. My brother

Extended Parallel Progression

1. My room
 2. Books and papers
 3. My clothes
4. My room

With the topics diagrammed this way, ESL writers can better see the relationships and coherence (or lack thereof) between sentences, paragraphs, and the main idea of the paper.¹³ They can then revise so that the topics of their sentences build the intended meaning consistently and coherently throughout the paragraph. As a final “check” of coherence, Ann Johns recommends students write a one-sentence summary of paragraphs, which becomes more difficult if coherence is lacking and the sentence topics are constantly changing.¹⁴

This might also be a good time for you and the writer to discuss cohesion, or how sentences build meaning by connecting to each other. For this purpose, I always keep a handy list of common connectors (like *however*, *nevertheless*,

in addition) over my desk to yank down and share with ESL writers who might need to make explicit the logical links that may be missing between sentences. Many college writing texts include such lists, Eli Hinkel notes, and ESL students especially need to understand what they mean, when and how to use them, and how vital they are when writing for college classes.¹⁵ It’s one more way you, the tutor, can help ESL writers clarify their intended meanings.

Clarifying Sentences*Focus on Form*

So far, we’ve seen how cultural differences in essay and paragraph organization might obscure an ESL writer’s intended meaning. Sometimes, however, single sentences are difficult to understand. To help the writer in this case, you might try a strategy from second language research called “focus on form.”¹⁶

Interestingly, “focus on form” works best during a writing conference in which you and the writer still mainly concentrate on “higher order concerns.” Don McAndrew and Tom Reigstad spell out these concerns nicely as being “central to the meaning and communication of the piece” like “matters of thesis and focus, development, structure and voice.”¹⁷ However, during such a conference, if you just *occasionally* direct the writer’s attention to problems with language that obscure meaning, you can help the writer more clearly express herself, provided she is developmentally ready, that is, provided the writer has enough background knowledge about the meaning and use of the language form (see Chapters 2 and 5). For instance, can the writer use negatives correctly? Is the word choice accurate? Are verb tenses in control? In most cases, we can probably safely assume that ESL college writers are developmentally ready. Furthermore, if you as tutor help ESL writers notice their existing language problems, then you are actually engaging their developmentally sharpened language processing mechanisms, which help the writer break into the new language system like spies cracking a code.¹⁸ In short, you are helping writers extract the form, which they can then map to meaning and function.¹⁹

Here’s an example (to clarify my own meaning). If a writer has made a mistake and you don’t understand the text, try repeating the unclear sentence back to the writer, perhaps in the form of a question, but with the mistake corrected. If the writer has written “I study by midnight,” you could ask, “You study *until* midnight? Or *around* midnight? *At* midnight?” which might be enough to help the writer notice the problem with the preposition and how the meaning changes with each choice (unless he is too tired, having been up all night). Or, if we return to the example provided at the beginning of this chapter, “I do not want to know the earth ache,” you might ask, “Earth ache? Hmm. . . . Well, ache means hurt. Does the earth hurt in some way? Are you writing about environmental problems?” If the writer shakes her head, you might volunteer more suggestions. “Do you not want to experience an ‘ear’

ache? Or do you mean an earthquake, like what they have in California and Japan?" (The answer, by the way, was earthquake, which the writer most definitely did not want to experience.)

This technique is simple and useful, but we shouldn't forget that writers will benefit most from only the *occasional* focus on form, and on just one or two problems at a time.²⁰ For the most part, higher order concerns probably should remain just that—a higher priority.

This is probably also a good time to bring up the issue of appropriating a writer's text, which, as a trained writing center tutor, you might be worried about after reading the previous example (see Chapter 5). After all, we don't want to take over the writer's work, and volunteering words might seem like too much help. With ESL writers, however, we might need to rethink our approach to the conference. Joy Reid believes we have responsibilities as "cultural informant[s]" to our students.²¹ I would add that we may also have—to some extent, at least—responsibilities to them as language resources. When we offer the writer a number of choices related to meaning (earth hurts? earache? earthquake?), it's still the writer's choice in the end to decide which word (and which meaning) he wants to convey. We might even see this as one way meaning is negotiated between tutor and writer, and second language research suggests quite strongly that negotiated meaning (1) facilitates learning, and (2) leads to better writing (and therefore, probably a clearer expression of meaning).²²

How Much Help, and When?

If we take the view that you, the tutor, and the ESL writer will together negotiate the intended meaning as a part of clarifying what the writer wants to say, then it's also important to know how much help to give, and when. Some experts suggest that as tutor (and therefore, probably a more capable user of English), you can best help ESL writers work at their potential level of ability by offering help only so long as it's needed, and then withdrawing your help as soon as writers "show signs of self-control" and the ability to go it alone.²³ So, if Vlado, a Bulgarian writer, comes to me, here's what I'd do to help him express his meaning more clearly.

First, I'd ask Valdo to read his paper silently and, on his own, underline and correct the errors he can find (in the meantime, I'd drink a coffee, file papers, maybe hum a little). When he says, "Ready, Amy," I would sit beside him and together we would discuss the corrected errors, which might go like this:

"Yes, good, that's right: you were *bored* by Tolstoy, not *boring*, though it's too bad you weren't *interested* in the novel, because I think *War and Peace* is a very *interesting* book."

If he missed an error that obscures meaning, I might point to the sentence and look puzzled, or ask him, "Hmmm . . . is there anything wrong *here*?" If Vlado is still unable to see the problem, I would offer more direct help by

pointing this time to the phrase or word and asking again: "What—about—here?" If Vlado is still unsure, I would target the problem directly: "Look at the verb tense here. 'I had been lived in Moscow for one year when I read Tolstoy.' Now, I know you don't live in Moscow now, because we're in Budapest. What's wrong with the verb tense?" If necessary, I will give the correct answer and explain the grammar rule, or we'll look it up together, but I will first offer help in ever more explicit and guided forms. Vlado will need my help only so long as he doesn't notice the error, or notices it but can't correct, or corrects just with specific pointing. Over time, however, he should rely less and less on my guidance, until finally he has consistent control over the problem structure, be it verb tense, word form, or something else.²⁴

Interactional Cues

In the previous example, you may have noticed how my puzzled look communicated to Vlado that there was some kind of problem with the sentence. I might also have frowned, grinned, stroked my chin, or widened my eyes. What you didn't see were Vlado's facial expressions and the other signals he gave me that showed when he was struggling with something and when he was about to solve a problem by himself. Amy Snyder Ohta calls these "interactional cues," and she presents quite convincing research that shows that, as tutor, you can help the writer the most when you pick up on and respond to these often very subtle signals, for that's when the writer is most developmentally ready to listen, and learn.²⁵ In other words, you can read these cues to know when it's time to help clarify writers' intended meanings, and when they are probably on the verge of clarifying it for themselves. Here are some things you should listen for before jumping in.

- rising or falling tones of voice
"The verb tense is past . . . present? I had lived . . . I have had . . . lived?"
When the voice goes up at the end in question form, the writer is ready for help. If the voice doesn't go up at the end, the writer is still thinking, so don't jump in yet. Wait for more signals.
- restarts of sentences
"The author, the author pre . . . per . . . , the author persites, presits, *persists!*"
Re-starts indicate the writer is still working out the problem, so wait.
- rates of speech
If the writer is speaking quickly, she is probably still at work on figuring out the best solution. When the rate slows down, you should get ready to offer help.²⁶

These are just a few examples. As tutor, you too can learn to interpret the writer's many differing cues, especially if you meet with the same writer regularly. And

one last point here: It's also important to remember that ESL writers frequently need more wait time after questions or when they are working out problems for themselves, so don't be afraid of longer silences. One way or another—by sigh or tone—the writer will let you know when he is ready for your intervention.

Clarifying Words

Lastly, a few words about words. Hinkel discusses an important survey in which U.S. college faculty describe ESL papers as too often “vague and confusing,” precisely because the writer may lack the necessary vocabulary to clarify their intended meaning.²⁷ You can, therefore, also help ESL writers by talking about certain words that can help clarify meanings dramatically. Hinkel describes the following as top priorities for ESL writers:

- qualifying hedges like *apparently*, *probably*, *ostensibly*, *seems*, *perhaps*, *most likely*
- modal verbs like *may*, *might*, *should*, *could*, *can*²⁸

In both cases, using these words can soften the writer's rhetoric considerably. Just listen to the difference in meaning between these two sentences:

Raising tuition will lower student enrollment.

Raising tuition will most likely lower student enrollment (we can't be sure it will, can we?).

You should also be prepared to encourage ESL writers to avoid vague nouns like *society*, *people*, *world*, or the vaguest of all perhaps, *truth*. My Hungarian students loved to use the phrases “to tell the truth” and “to be honest,” which they had learned and were (justifiably) proud of. In most college writing, however, these phrases can be problematic. Helping ESL writers build their academic vocabularies this way can not only help clarify their intended meaning, it can also relieve some of the anxiety and frustration they feel when they get their papers back all marked up in red ink.

This chapter has explored why you may not always understand an ESL writer's meaning, and it has offered the following strategies that you can use to help writers clarify just what it is they want to say.

- You can explore with writers how they learned to write and what's expected at U.S. universities.
- You can help them analyze how coherent their paragraphs are.
- You can guide them through rough sentences and help them choose clearer words.

Through my work tutoring ESL writers, I've learned that in Egypt, babies are welcomed into the world by a party on the seventh day. In Taiwan, the number four is unlucky (it rhymes with the word for *death*). What challenging work, I say. And how rewarding.

Notes

1. Kaplan, 12.
2. Leki, 138.
3. Fox, 114.
4. Kaplan, 12.
5. For more on contrastive rhetoric, see Panetta (2001) or Connor (1996).
6. Hinds, 65.
7. Suzuki, quoted in Hinds, 66.
8. Hinds, 67.
9. This idea comes from Connor and Farmer (1990), 126–39. Connor and Farmer draw on the work of Finnish linguist Liisa Lautamatti.
10. Connor and Farmer, 127.
11. Connor and Farmer, 128–33.
12. Connor and Farmer, 130.
13. Connor and Farmer, 130.
14. Johns, 256.
15. Hinkel, 144.
16. Long in Doughty, 259–84.
17. McAndrew and Reigstad, 42.
18. Doughty, 276.
19. Doughty, 265.
20. Doughty, 290.
21. Reid, 218.
22. See, for instance, Goldstein and Conrad (1990).
23. Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 466–68.
24. Modeled after Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 469–71.
25. Ohta, 52.
26. Ohta, 62–77.
27. Hinkel, 52.
28. Hinkel, 247–50.

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Looking at the Whole Text

Jennifer Staben and Kathryn Dempsey Nordhaus

A student walks into the writing center, sits down in the chair next to you, and pulls out a paper, announcing, "I'm a terrible writer. Can you read this and tell me if I did it right?" Another student comes in, sits down, pushes a paper across the table, and says, "My English is terrible. Can you help me with it?" Both students offer their papers with an unvoiced disclaimer: my work isn't necessarily a reflection of my *self* or my *knowledge*. Both students offer their papers with an unvoiced request: please help me without judging me. But only one of these students speaks English as a second language (ESL). Can you guess which?

The answer lies at the heart of these students' requests. The native English-speaking (NES) student has invited you to critique her writing—the whole text; whereas, the ESL student has invited you to critique his English—the language. Although this may at first appear to be a small semantic difference, it's a difference that looms large in a writing conference. The goals of most writing centers today reflect Stephen North's "idea" of writing centers: "to produce better writers, not better writing."¹ To achieve this goal, tutors are trained to look beyond the language—to look at the text as a whole; to look at the text within the context for which it is created; and to look at the writer's relationship with the text and with the audience the text will reach.

That's the goal, but it can be a challenge to meet it when working with an ESL writer. Language difficulties may be the first things you notice as you read a given piece or the student's main reason for coming to the writing center in the first place. Some ESL writers use the request "Can you check my grammar?" in a very general sense to mean "Could you look this over for me?" Others definitely mean what they say; they want help with their English and they ask for it directly.

Because writing centers strive to be student-centered, writing conferences with ESL students often make tutors feel that they are faced with a difficult choice: comply with the ESL students' invitations to focus on grammar and