

ESL Writers

A GUIDE FOR
WRITING
CENTER
TUTORS

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Reading an ESL Writer's Text*

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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."

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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*, Iona 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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