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Expanding Audiences for Online Writing Labs: OWLs in the English-as-a-foreign Language Context

Joshua M. Paiz

Good evening, Ladies and Gentleman. My name is Joshua Paiz, a doctoral student at Purdue University and the current coordinator of the Purdue Online Writing Lab. I am here today to share with you recent work on Online Writing Labs as support for writers in the EFL audience, a truly and rapidly expanding audience for web-based writing-instruction resources.
In tonight’s presentation I will begin by highlighting the present, albeit aging, knowledge on OWLs. This discussion will include contributions from both writing centers work and L2 writing work, and it will conclude by reporting on one project of OWL uses and practitioner attitudes toward OWLs. Please keep in mind, that the english-as-a-foreign language/english-as-a-second language dichotomy is one that has been heavily critiqued in the field of applied linguistics/TESOL. However, for our purposes let us adopt this term and define it thusly. EFL will refer to simply to non-anglophone countries where local varieties of Englishes have yet to become firmly establish. The bulk of this presentation will focus on the potential place of OWL and on servicing a global audience using the Purdue OWL as an example.

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Presentation Overview

- The present knowledge on OWLs
  - And OWLs in the EFL context more specifically
- The place of OWLs
- Servicing a global audience
  - The case of the Purdue OWL
- Future directions
Allow me to begin by sharing with you’re the relatively scant and relatively aging body of literature on OWLs. This review will pull from work carried out by both disciplinary and interdisciplinary scholars working in a number of fields, but pulling most heavily from those working in WCT and ALx.
Shortly after OWLs began to take flight across the US, a number of OWL-related articles in journals related to computers and writing, rhetoric and composition, second language writing, and writing center theory have appeared. Also, edited volumes like Hobson’s *Wiring the Writing Center*, Inman and Sewell’s *Taking Flight with OWLs: Examining Electronic Writing Center Work*, and Barnett and Blumner’s *The Longman Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice* have helped to guide scholars, practitioners and OWL designers in lobbying for, planning, and launching their own OWLs. These articles and edited volumes examined the place of OWLs in writing center theory at a time when the technology was still new and, while many administrators felt institutional and perhaps even disciplinary pressure to adopt the technology, resistance and uncertainty were still relatively high. Some of the major concerns with implementing OWLs were that they would severely cut into already over-taxed writing center monetary and human resources (e.g., Harris and Pemberton; Monroe, Rickly, Condon, and Butler; and Shadle), that there would be issues with equal access to all students (Palmquist), and that OWLs would be the antithesis of writing center work due to underlying disconnects with mainstream writing center philosophy and theory (e.g., Beebe and Boneville; Hobson). This final issue—disconnects with dominant writing center philosophy and theory—was at the forefront for many OWL designers as they went about their work of planning and implementing OWLs. This led Colpo, Fullmer, and Lucas, three OWL designers from the University of Nevada at Reno to state that, “...the very concept of information-
When it comes to examine the work done on OWLs in the EFL context there is woefully little to be found. The two pieces mentioned on the slide above are two of the only pieces found after completing a rather protracted review of the literature. Tan examines the best practices of successful writing centers and online writing labs from across North America. This included brief examinations of OWLs from North American and European institutions, before moving on to examining a few OWLs that originated in the Asian context. Tan noted that while many of the best practices—included effective OWL design and implementation—have traveled well to Asian educational contexts, there are a number of unique traits of writing centers and OWLs outside of North America. Namely, that they are not ubiquitously monolingual, that they tend not to offer synchronous online tutoring (either via email or other CMC tools), and that there is a relative dearth of original materials on Asian OWLs, as most seem to merely link to North American OWLs, which may have a longer history of in-house content development (403).

Gu and Ding provided a glimpse of OWLs as pedagogical tools in the Chinese context. This article focuses on the classroom and on the potential support function that OWLs can serve for the EFL writing class and for EFL writers. Please note, however, that this piece is currently only available in Chinese, and that the summary of it here is based on of a summary provided by one my esteemed colleagues from China as part of another project (Zhang).
All of this to say that despite a steady rise in international enrollments and in internet penetration in national contexts that may typically be defined as EFL, research on how OWLs, many of which are openly available and happily consumed by EFL writers and practitioners, there has been very, very little research done on OWLs in this context, and even less of it readily consumable to an English reading audience. Gu and Ding, which could provide a fascinating look at how OWLs can be used to support the EFL writing classroom is only accessible to those with a relatively high Chinese reading proficiency. And, Tan focused on what was being done. OWLs can serve a vital role in supporting the EFL writing classroom. But, we do not, at present know what users in EFL contexts think of OWLs, nor do we know what they need.
The study that I’m about to describe to you, a version of which is in preparation for publication, attempts to address this rather sizable gap by looking at EFL practitioners’ attitudes, uses, and needs regarding one OWL in particular—in this case, the Purdue OWL. Full disclosure. This study was originally carried out for Purdue OWL administrators, myself included, to get a better sense of how to serve our ever growing global audience. It has since opened our eyes to the possible space and place of OWLs in general and in OWLs in relation to EFL contexts more specifically.
To carry out the research we deployed a two-part instrument. The first part of the instrument was a forty-one item survey, developed using the Qualtrics survey package. This survey was comprised of a bank of yes/no, multiple-choice/multiple-answer, likert-scale, and open ended questions developed by Purdue OWL staff during June of 2012. The final survey contained: 7 demographic questions to help the Purdue OWL staff gain a better sense of respondents’ teaching history--attempting to account for national and educational contexts and years of service; 3 general OWL usage and attitudes questions; and, 29 Purdue OWL specific questions, focusing on individual resources types, their usage patterns, and perceived effectiveness. Out of the 29 Purdue OWL specific questions 20 were required question and 9 were optional follow-up, open-ended questions. The survey also contained one contact question. This survey was sent out to eight professional organizations that target L2 writing practitioners, scholars and program administrators for their member-base.

Once the survey was completed, a 4-item open-ended follow-up interview was conducted via email. This follow-up was sent out to the 46 individuals who self-identified as being willing to be contacted by Purdue OWL staff for additional questions and comments.
This map highlights the countries reported as the most recent EFL-teaching posting of the respondents. What is interesting is that the majority of responses came from so-called Center Countries—from countries where English fills the role of the primary or official institutional language. This occurs in places like the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand. Also represented disproportionately to any other contexts are Expanding Circle Countries, countries where English plays at least a limited institutional role—in this case, Mexico.
However, if we look at the regions in which respondents report having taught in the past—and this is broken down by continent—we see a slightly different picture. We see a greater deal of activity in both the expanding and outer circles. That is, we see much more activity on the part of participants in the traditionally-defined English as a Foreign Language Contexts.
Major Findings

- **Major Finding 1: OWL usage, Purdue and Other**
  - Supplemental instructional material, supplemental writing exercises, and self-reference
- **Major Finding 2: Appropriateness of OWL resources**
  - Major linguistic barriers to use exist
- **Major Finding 3: What practitioners report needing more of**
  - Video lectures, Audio Lectures, Sample essays, more linguistically accessible resources

Our data show that dominant usage patterns for both OWLs in general and the Purdue OWL more specifically mirror one another in many key ways. For example, respondents report using both general OWL and the Purdue OWL rather often as resources for supplemental instructional materials. Also, usages of OWL in general and the Purdue OWL more specifically are relatively high in regards to use as self-reference tools and as sources of supplemental writing exercises.

One of the major exigencies for this study was to determine if Purdue OWL resources were meeting the needs of its users. Looking at these data as a whole it is clear that there is no small degree of ambivalence about the appropriateness of existing Purdue OWL resources for the teaching of L2 writing, particularly in the EFL context. This is represented by the high percentages of respondents that responded neither agree nor disagree in response to questions about the appropriateness of Purdue OWL resources with out any modification. This is most apparent with regard to Purdue OWL discipline-specific writing instructional resources. And, perhaps even more shockingly in the ambivalence in regards to the Purdue OWL’s ESL-specific and general grammar exercises, and ESL-specific and general grammar instructional materials. An examination of some of the email interview responses may help to shed some light on these findings. The two largest barriers to use of the L2 Writing-specific resources were the density of some resources on the screen and the linguistic complexity of many of the resources available on the Purdue OWL. With
There are a number of future directions that I would love to share with you. However, my time is rapidly fading. Suffice it to say that this is a place where far more research needs to be done. US-based OWLs should, at some point, engage in usability studies that have been informed by preliminary findings from intercultural rhetoric. They should also engage in a well-designed studies of the linguistic accessibility of their L2 writing resources, this can benefit both ESL and EFL audiences. And, finally, more OWLs based in various EFL countries need to be “hatched” and they may be able to carve out their niche by addressing the unique needs of multilingual writers in their respective national contexts.
Thank you kindly. Good night.