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Best Practices & Resources for Teaching ESL Written Communication

Linda S. Bergmann  
*Purdue University*

Vicki Kennell  
*Purdue University, v kennell@purdue.edu*

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Best Practices & Resources for Teaching ESL Written Communication

Vicki Kennell, ESL Specialist, Purdue Writing Lab
v kennell@purdue.edu
Linda Bergmann, Director, Purdue Writing Lab
lbergmann@purdue.edu

Before switching slides, say: “I think it is appropriate that we begin with an exercise that puts you in the frame of mind of an international student.”
Assignment #1

Excogitate on the place of the accipitary in the context of eyots, leasows, fells, and garths. In order to avoid writing gallimaufry with vilipendency, cooptate a means of handling the material that allows for its equipollence. Bloviation is not acceptable in this context.

Length: 2-4 pages.
Due at the end of class.

Vicki
Pause for them to read.
Ask: “How many of you consider yourselves native speakers of this language?”
If anyone says “yes”, say “I see we have a few medievalists in the audience today.”
Say: “(The rest of) You are in good company because this is the place that many of your international students find themselves in. In this presentation, we will make 2 general recommendation for teaching written communication.”
Change slide.
“Understanding and accommodating cultural differences is, to a great extent, what ESL instruction is all about.”

Muriel Harris and Tony Silva


Muriel Harris and Tony Silva, two of Purdue’s own, have this to say about ESL instruction.
“Understanding and accommodating cultural differences is, to a great extent, what ESL instruction is all about.”
Muriel Harris and Tony Silva

What we talk about today will fall under these two basic categories: understanding and accommodating.
Say: “Before we go any further, allow me to make an accommodation for you.”
Assignment #1

Reflect on the place of the falconer in the context of small islands, meadows used for pasture, moorland hills, and enclosed gardens. In order to avoid writing a confused medley of things with arrogant rudeness, choose a means of handling the material that allows for equal validity of conflicting data. Writing verbosely is not acceptable in this context.

“Here is what assignment #1 means in the current vernacular.”
Understanding the Writers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background &amp; Culture</th>
<th>Language Ability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• International students</td>
<td>• Lack slang/idioms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Home country education</td>
<td>• Grammar emphasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Travel abroad experience</td>
<td>• Read 50-70% slower in L2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• First language (L1) writing</td>
<td>• Produce language slower (writing, speaking)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Etiquette of questions</td>
<td>• May need to translate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Respect for teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Authority unquestionable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Linda

Two basic categories of information when it comes to understanding the writers:

Visa holders NOT immigrants (no previous experience in US schools)
Home country education: may have previous college, may be intellectual elite

L1 writing—may or may not have been taught; may or may not be at the college level
Questions may be considered rude.
For instance, Malawi--dangerous to criticize the government

Important caveat: We will use examples from various cultures (usually from a particular person's experience). These are not meant to indicate that all students from the given culture will definitely exhibit the stated characteristics. Just as there is variety among American students, there will be variety among the students of any given culture. The examples we give are meant to aid you in understanding your students, to broaden your awareness of the skills they bring and the rationales behind the writing they produce.
Understanding the Writing

- Organization
- Style
- Grammar
- Plagiarism
- Incomprehensible papers

Vicki
Understanding the writers is only the first step. We also need to understand the writing. Touch on 5 points today:
Understanding the Writing: Organization

- American academics value linear, reader-friendly organization.
- Other cultures may value different, more writer-friendly forms of organization.

American—the old “tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, tell them what you told them”

Digressing in order to highlight another aspect of the topic: **Japan**: 4 part order (intro, development, turning point [an apparently totally-different topic], conclusion (shows the connection), reader has to participate in the work

Talking around the topic until it becomes clear to the reader: **Ecuador**: talk around and around the main point, by the time it comes, the reader is 95% sure of what it will be, again the reader has to participate

These are just two examples of the possibilities for organizing a paper in a different (but structured and taught) way.

Important: Many students from outside the US are NOT taught American conventional forms of writing. They need explicit instruction to change.
Understanding the Writing:

**Style**

- American academics value concise, clear, straightforward prose.
- Other cultures may value other stylistic elements of writing.
Understanding the Writing:

Style

- American academics value concise, clear, straightforward prose.
- Other cultures may value other stylistic elements of writing:
  - “Flowery” or adjective-heavy prose
  - Digression
  - Hints rather than statements

Turkey: long, elaborate, more poetic sentences; the pleasure comes from the reading as well as the content; some punctuation is for visual pleasure

Jordan: exaggeration is acceptable or preferred in order to attract the reader

Again—when you see these differences in student writing, do you assume “lack of ability” or “different ability” (with American style not yet taught/mastered). There is a difference between a disorganized paper and a paper that is organized according to an unfamiliar plan.
Not everything related to language is “grammar.” For instance, lack of available vocabulary can result in garbled sentences.
When we do talk specifically about grammar, everyone tries to come up with a list of “common errors made by ESL writers.” In this, as we said earlier, remember that writers are individuals. There may be “common errors” (or common styles or common organizations) or there may not be.

Word order: some odd sounding sentences are simply in the wrong order (John will be at eight home.)

Tense: simple present (regularly, often, never) vs. present progressive (happening now); students may come from an L1 that lacks verb tense and indicates time entirely by additional words

The important thing to note here is that not all grammar errors are “skills” that can be learned and applied. The last 3 categories on this slide mostly require memorization (i.e., more like vocabulary) rather than skill with a rule.

Two-word verbs (phrasal verbs): get is to acquire, is “get up” to acquire something high? Or while standing?, totally different meaning, can’t be looked up in many dictionaries

Prepositions: in a car vs. on a bus, fill out a form vs. fill in a blank; (World Englishes—which were the students taught?) British English vs. American English (at the
weekend vs. on the weekend; in a team vs. on a team)—“You say tomayto, I say tomahto”; oral differences such as this are entirely understandable. Often, these prepositional differences are also understandable, but when we see them in writing, we tend to get upset and worry about “correctness”. Instead we ought to consider it an instance of “written accent.”

Articles: Also differences between British English and American English—in hospital vs. in the hospital, also other cultures either lack entirely or use them differently, one place where second language learners may NEVER attain native-like proficiency
Understanding the Writing:

Plagiarism—Cultural Issues

- Homogeneous culture—everyone knows the same information.
- Non-capitalist culture—there is little private property in any realm of life, including intellectual.
- Audience respect—all intelligent/educated people will recognize these long/famous quotes.

Linda
Vietnam (don’t go outside the classroom for information—DVD).

Next slide adds “panic!”

Read 50-70% slower in second language.

Do not assume malicious intent. Seize the teaching opportunity.
Understanding the Writing:
Incomprehensible Papers

• Students may possess greater oral proficiency than written proficiency.
• Students may lack the necessary vocabulary for the topic.
• Students may have written in their L1 and run it through an online translator.

Vicki
Oral proficiency—have them say what they mean, may be able to use that verbatim in the paper. Could also try recording their ideas and transcribing them.

Vocabulary—how do you paraphrase if you only know one way to say something?

Translator—see next slide for example
Translations from a Chinese Essay

Online Translator:
...In homeland has been beckoning my mind, let me a long time to savor the taste of missing. That Order of the Carrying countless childhood fun and little growth imprinting is my life Beloved and nostalgic. I love that the most beautiful in the land has mountains, water and people.

Experienced Human Translator:
...In the days when I drift around in the outside world, home has always been the place my soul longs for. With numerous memories of my childhood happiness and reminders of my growing pains, my hometown is the love of my life. I love the mountains, rivers, and the people there, the most beautiful in the world.

Accommodating International Students

- In-class accommodations
- Assignment accommodations
- Assessment accommodations

Linda
We’ve highlighted things for you to understand about international students and their writing. The rest of the talk will deal with accommodations you can make.
The key idea here is REDUNDANCY. Build in multiple ways (not just auditory) for students to get the same piece of information.
The key idea here is PROVIDE PROCESSING TIME. Thoughtful responses in any format take longer (answers to questions, essay exams, in-class writing reflections, etc.) because of the extra processing needed. So adjust your method to allow for extra time.

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http://writingcenter.unc.edu/faculty-resources/tips-on-teaching-esl-students/

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In-Class Accommodations

• Discussion or Class Participation
  – Post topics/questions in advance
  – Speak clearly and avoid slang
  – Be patient (silence might indicate “still processing” rather than “no response”)
  – Be understanding (might be embarrassed by imperfect English)
  – Be supportive (provide a word, do something useful with a slightly “off” response)
The title of this talk (Teaching ESL Written Communication) presupposes the latter option.
Writing Assignment Accommodations

• Be aware of cultural barriers
  – Topics from popular culture or American issues (underage drinking, gun control, movies)
  – Topics requiring knowledge of cultural assumptions or worldviews outside of the class content (e.g., literary analysis of an African American author—history of race relations in the U.S.)

Also, Woodstock, Jay Lenno, David Letterman

Another problem is assignments that want students to critique American institutions—internationals may not know much and they may not want to criticize their host country.

Or, they might not want to criticize authoritative texts.
Writing Assignment Accommodations

- Allow cultural choices for cultures other than the U.S. when possible
  - Materials
  - Supporting examples
  - Topics

Depends on the purpose and level of the class. A class in US government, with an assignment to write about the role of the constitution in US history, may not have a place for students to write about the documents their own governments are based on. An introductory writing class, with a similar assignment, should have more “flexibility to allow international students a way into talking about [the topic] from their position as newcomers to the U.S.” From https://carmenwiki.osu.edu/display/osuwacresources/Autumn+2012--Creating+Intercultural+Classrooms
Writing Assignment Accommodations

- Offer students templates, especially for thesis statements, introductions, and conclusions

Explain about how US students learn 5-paragraph essay (which is a template). Using templates can help internationals “catch up” with that experience. We’ll return to how to construct a good assignment later.
Writing Assignment Accommodations

• Offer students templates, especially for thesis statements, introductions, and conclusions

Sample proposition template:

“The ________ that ________ seems to me to

  assertion/denial

  constitute a fundamental ________ about

  confusion/misunderstanding/mistake

________________.”


“The assertion that international students at the university level require no additional language help *seems to me to constitute a fundamental* misunderstanding *about* the nature of second language acquisition.” (My sample input)

“The assertion that prescription drugs are fairly priced *seems to me to constitute a fundamental* confusion *about* the profit motive of pharmaceutical companies.” (from King (2007), p. 24.)
Writing Assignment Accommodations

• Offer students templates, especially for thesis statements, introductions, and conclusions

  Sample thesis template:
  “I am going to look at __________, in order to find out _____,

because it will address or resolve this larger

problem:____________.”


“I am going to look at plagiarism in American colleges, in order to find out how much of a problem it is and how colleges have tried to solve it, because it will address the larger problem of how to teach students moral thinking and ethical behavior.”
(Booth, et. al p. 76)

Do templates result in writing that sounds rough or wordy or formulaic or stilted? Sometimes. Do they help a student who has no idea how to state a thesis to be clear and to deal successfully with complex information in a limited space? Definitely.
Constructing Assignments

- Avoid cultural pitfalls.
- Provide clear, detailed assignment guidelines in writing.
- Be clear about all expectations (grading rubrics can be helpful).
- WAC—teach how to write for the specific discipline.
- Provide successful examples with annotations explaining the success.

Vicki
We are not calling these “accommodations” since you will notice that most of these will be helpful to native speakers as well as non-native speakers. Instead, they are good practices that see writing assignments as a place to continue to teach writing along with the academic content.
Two important points:
These are “best practices”—make it work as well as you can in your unique circumstances.
All students benefit, not just internationals.

Last bullet—not graded/corrected, limited time per session but repeated sessions, increases practice using/thinking in the vocabulary of the content area, increases practice writing in a low-stakes environment, ex. 7-minutes to write on assigned topic maybe once a week or so
Various options for marking.

The problem with marking everything:
Three 2’s: too much new language in too many new contexts in too little time to usefully process everything (citation?)

Change slide.

Spoken accents are not only permitted but accepted as normal. Written accents should be viewed in a similar manner (e.g., article misuse).

So, decide what is “good enough” (doesn’t hinder communication, etc.) and grade based on that.
Writing Assessment Accommodations:  
Options for Grading Grammar

• Mark errors; let students attempt the correction.
• Mark only serious errors vs. mark all errors (student preference).
• Mark errors, but only deduct points for errors that hinder communication.
• Ignore written “accent” (e.g., article misuse) and focus on errors that hinder communication.

Various options for marking which is different from grading.

The problem with marking everything:  
Three 2’s:  **too** much new language in **too** many new contexts in **too** little time to usefully process everything (citation?)

Spoken accents are not only permitted but accepted as normal. Written accents should be viewed in a similar manner (e.g., article misuse).

So, decide what is “good enough” (doesn’t hinder communication, etc.) and grade based on that.
Writing Lab Help

• One-on-one tutorials with trained consultants
• Conversation groups
• Self-study materials
• OWL materials
  http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/

Linda
Link to the OWL here and show some relevant materials?
Bibliography

Websites
http://writingcenter.unc.edu/faculty-resources/tips-on-teaching-esl-students/
http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/faculty/methods/grammar.html
http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/tutor/problems/esl.shtml
http://esl.fis.edu/grammar/langdiff/index.htm

Books & Articles

Video
Writing Across Borders, (3 parts), produced by Oregon State University (accessible via youtube.com)
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vkennell@purdue.edu

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