

1-1-1981

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### Recommended Citation

Thaiss, Christopher J. and Kurylo, Carolyn (1981) "Working with the ESL Student: Learning Patience, Making Progress," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1051>

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## **Working with the ESL Student: Learning Patience, Making Progress**

*Christopher J. Thaiss and Carolyn Kurylo*

“I can’t do anything I want, if I can’t write English.” Margarita’s desire to improve lights her eyes and makes her soft Ecuadorian accent tremble with emphasis. This strong motivation, possessed by almost all the ESL students at George Mason, will help her achieve relative fluency in writing in a remarkably short time. But, like many of the other 100 of these students who visit George Mason’s Writing Place each semester, Margarita is hindered by an impatience to move more quickly than she can through her composition courses. Above average, sometimes brilliant, students in their native countries, they discover that their writing of English—which they may have studied for years in school—keeps them from passing introductory courses. For the Writing Place staff, the task is as much to put this “failure” in the perspective of reasonable expectations as it is to discover strategies for improving the writing. Of course, reasonable expectations vary with the individual, so that when a student declares, as Margarita will later in this session, “I must pass English 101 this semester,” I try to learn as much as I can about his or her academic goals, as well as about course standing, before either encouraging or trying to mitigate the sense of urgency. Occasionally, a student is under a constraint—a government scholarship for two years of study in the United States, for example—which compels rapid advancement; in these cases, the staff member carefully maps out, with the student’s teacher, a program of extra work in the Writing Place to help the student complete the course as efficiently as possible. The reason for Margarita’s urgency is the more common: she feels that she must quickly prove her ability to succeed in the American university, and her difficulty in English 101 has given rise to self-doubt. For Margarita, her doubts as an ESL student are compounded by those she feels as a woman in her forties returning to college after a long absence. Not only does she

wonder, as most returning students do, if her knowledge and study skills have irremediably deteriorated, but also her age and interests keep her from the company of the much younger ESL students who share her problems in writing American English and who could put her doubts in perspective.

I wish I could tell her that her work can be brought up to “C” (passing) level by the end of this semester, but in this, the 9th, week of the 14, her brief narrative about arriving in New York shows her unfamiliarity with American idioms and English syntax. In addition, this particular piece lacks organization, focus, and details to flesh out her impressions. I have not seen her earlier papers, but on her first visit one week ago, she assured me that her professor has been finding the same kinds of errors all semester and that she has yet to write a satisfactory draft; hence, her decision to seek help in the Writing Place. During that first visit, we reviewed the graded, commented-on draft of the New York paper, which her teacher would allow her to redraft and resubmit. I focused my attention on the syntax and diction errors marked by the professor. I judged that I would begin with what could be improved in her writing most quickly: language-related errors that her teacher had most attended to and that no doubt most painfully showed her deficiencies. I use Mina Shaughnessy’s method of grouping the errors into types in order to make them seem much fewer and thus easier to correct. Expecting to work with Margarita in ensuing weeks, I also decided to limit this discussion to two or three error types that she could consider in depth before the next session.

My first reading of her paper showed me that many of her errors involved use of the definite article, particularly with plurals. I named this error-type to her, then pointed out each time she had made it. “Yes,” she agreed, “I have been having trouble with that.” I then told her that in English plural nouns don’t need the “the” before them unless one is speaking of a particular group of people or things that he or she has already referred to or wants to emphasize. Taking the particular examples in her paper, I explained the difference in meaning occasioned by the presence or absence of “the.” I wrote the rule and the examples on a sheet of paper for her to study.

We next turned our attention to some idiomatic verb-preposition and adjective-preposition pairs. Here the principle was that there was no rule, and that the student would just have to memorize the idioms. I wrote this idea on the same sheet with the examples. Margarita was somewhat troubled by the lack of a systematic explanation; I assured her that more often than not preposition use was guided by fixed meaning rather than by idiomatic quirk and pointed out several places in her paper where she

had successfully applied these meanings. “So I’ll continue to make mistakes until I learn these idioms?” she asked. I said that her improvement would be gradual and that this was to be expected. She asked, “Do you have a book of all the English idioms?” I replied that many other foreign students ask that question and that I would ask it myself were I learning to become fluent in writing a different language. However, I said, no list could account for even a fraction of the idioms, and that the best and surest way—the way all native speakers use—is to read as many kinds of works in English as possible and to listen closely to English speakers. I suggested that the best list she could use would be one she compiled herself from reading and from her needs in writing as they arose. I said that the short list I had begun could be a start. She studied the list for a moment. “I will learn these by next week,” she said. “Perhaps we can talk about more idioms then?” I nodded, and we set up an appointment.

She has redrafted the paper for this session and, as I hoped, the errors we discussed have been corrected as well as some of the others. I notice also that she has rethought the paper, rearranging some ideas and adding a few details. There’s still much work to be done, but she’s definitely making progress. I point out the changes I see and tell her how much more vivid the narrative is. She seems more relaxed, ready to do more work on idioms. But her next comment surprises me: “I want to work on organization and making my essay clear. No one has told me how to do that.” I ask if she feels better about her articles and prepositions, and she reiterates her intent to continue reading and studying what she reads and hears. “And I’ll keep asking questions,” she adds.

I hear in her comment about her teachers’ neglect of organization and clarity a familiar complaint from non-native speakers, many of whom have never received more than red marks on their writing and an occasional, opaque “correct your English” or “Get help with your writing.” Teachers, even in English classes, rarely get beyond the surface errors of ESL students to the more important elements of composition. Margarita knows that she will not pass English 101 without much work on these basics.

I turn my attention from idioms to ideas. I point to a sentence that she has added to clarify her meaning, and to another that she has moved from one paragraph to another in which it fits more snugly. I emphasize that she has made these improvements without instruction, and that she was able to make them because she already has a fairly strong idea of her audience and purpose. We talk more about these two factors. I ask her to identify the kind of person she is writing this for: How much does your reader know about New York? Is this person a visitor to America? I ask

her what she wants her reader to learn from the narrative: how do you want your reader to feel about New York? how do you want your reader to feel about you as an observer? After thinking and speaking, Margarita scrutinizes her paper. She has just said that she is writing this paper for an American who knows New York and that she wants that person to know how a newcomer sees that city for the first time on a rainy autumn day. “But I have not said that this was my first day in the city,” she says as she pencils in the change. After reading more she says, “Now, I do say that I saw and learned a lot, but I need to write some of the things I saw, don’t I?” She begins to make a list in the margins: “brown leaves, the subway, the Metropolitan Museum of Art...” For the next twenty minutes we consider other statements in the paper, some of which she rephrases in response to my uncertainty about her intent.

The session begins to impinge on the time of the next scheduled client; I suggest that we set up an appointment for later in the week or for the week following. She says that she has begun a new paper for her English class and would like me to see it before she hands it in. “I feel pretty good about it already.” Then, as she is about to leave, she asks, “What happens if I don’t pass English 101 this semester? Is there anything I can do?” I reply that only her professor can tell her if he thinks she still has a chance to pass and that she needs to talk with him about it. I repeat that she has made real progress, but may need another semester in 101 before going on to the next course. I explain that 101 is graded “A, B, C, No Credit”—not “F”—because the University expects that many students do not have sufficient preparation to pass the course in one semester and so does not penalize these students with a failing grade on their permanent records. She says that her instructor had not explained the rule in just this way; she brightens at the thought that the University has some official awareness of problems like hers. I add that in talking with her professor she should let him know her desire to improve organization and clarity. “In my report to him I’ll also mention this need, and I’ll tell him how conscientiously you’ve been working on all phases of your writing.”

A week later Margarita visits only briefly. She apologizes for not bringing her paper, but, she says, “I decided to hand it in to my teacher a bit early. I think he’ll like it.” She has spoken with him and has learned that she still has a chance for a “C.” “If I don’t pass, I’ll take 101 again this summer, so I can enroll in 102 in the fall.” She says that she has already made room in her summer plans for the course and will make sure that her new professor is aware of her particular needs. “So you see,” she adds with a smile, “I’ll really be right on schedule.”

## Carolyn Kurylo

The morning Teresa entered The Writing Place with a handful of poems and a request for creative writing instruction, I sensed her need to use writing to discover *what lies within*, to find what poet William Stafford calls “the self most centrally yours.” The images in her poems created startling pictures ranging from interplanetary visitors to men struggling against forces of nature; yet the abstractions beginning writers frequently use filled the poems and prevented her reader from reliving the experiences she described. I explained why today’s writers avoid abstractions and then selected several poems from George Mason University’s literary magazine, *phoebe*, to demonstrate the concrete language poets use. I showed her how William Stafford depicts clouds in “big suits with zippers in the back,” how David McAleavey transforms figurines into “satyrs/pronging nymphs, nymphs/slapping centaurs.” We read poems with vivid similes and metaphors, poems in which “slender leaves” become “patterned dolls” and an old woman in a field of poppies gathers a basketful of silence. At the end of our discussion, I told Teresa to spend several days creating images that show the reader what she sees. I suggested that she experiment with both similes and metaphors to discover the most effective means of describing her inner world.

Several days later Teresa returned, her rewritten poems rich with “polliwogs” and “shards of glass.” I realized that if she had absorbed this much from reading *phoebe*, she would benefit from reading additional literary magazines, as well as books by contemporary poets. I suggested writers, such as Robert Bly, who experiment with the prose poem, a form especially helpful to students whose poetry is too abstract. I showed her Bly’s collection of prose poems, *This Body Is Made Of Camphor And Gopherwood*, to demonstrate how this poet describes what he sees in detail, how he focuses on a single image, such as a “woman priest’s hair still fresh among/Shang ritual things....” During the session, I emphasized that many beginning writers benefit from experimenting with the prose poem since it demands that they use precise language to describe the physical world as they perceive it.

We next looked at the surrealist poem and discussed how this form elicits spontaneous images. I explained how surrealism manifests itself in both art and poetry and then showed Teresa examples of Rene Magritte’s paintings and Russell Edson’s poetry. Using Edson’s “Counting Sheep” as a guide, I pointed out how the recurring phrase, “He wonders,” elicits surprising images and asked Teresa to select a word or phrase, such as “I

dream,” to use as a unifying device for a poem of her own. I suggested that she let her intuitions take over, that this was an exercise that would allow her to get in touch with an imaginary world.

In subsequent sessions we began experimenting with in-class exercises. One of Teresa’s favorites is an exercise poet Rod Jellema uses to stimulate students to think quickly and spontaneously. In his work with Poets-in-the-Schools programs, Jellema asks students to respond to the following five-minute exercise:

\_\_\_\_\_ is as \_\_\_\_\_ as \_\_\_\_\_.

- (1) Fill in the first blank with *anything*.
- (2) Fill in the second blank with *something surprising*.
- (3) Fill in the third blank with a *sound* or *action*.

(Any grammatical units may be used.)

From this experiment, Teresa learned that anything can happen in a poem, that sometimes the strangest images are the strongest. She accepted the bizarre lines that emerged and realized the wealth of material she could draw from an inner world. As with the surrealist exercise, she learned to trust her senses, even when “black is as noisy as elephants running” or “a scarf is as supple as a child frowning.”

At the end of these sessions, I asked her to describe the most valuable lesson she learned from the in-class exercises. She paused for a moment and then grinned: “Writing poetry enables me to create worlds I never dreamed existed, worlds no one else can shape in exactly the way I can.”

Next semester I will continue using an inductive approach to teaching poetry writing. As opposed to telling Teresa how I would write a poem, I will give her the opportunity to discover which emotions are actually hers.

Chris Thaiss is the Director of the Writing Place at George Mason University. Carolyn Kurylo is a staff member.