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Non-native Speakers as Students in First-year Composition Classes with Native Speakers: How can Writing Tutors Help?

Barbara L. Kennedy

Many universities combine native and non-native speakers of English in the same freshman composition classes. Certainly both native and non-native speakers can benefit from each other in these combined classes. However, too often instructors of these combined classes are coming to them with little or no background in Teaching English as a Second Language. They find themselves faced with a significant number of ESL students in their classes and are uncertain how to handle the composing problems that these ESL students have. Moreover, there are instances when techniques which could benefit ESL students are not appropriate for native speakers since non-native speakers sometimes differ from native speakers in the types of English-language problems they have. Often ESL students are sent to the writing center to work on their particular problems in composing. In addition, since many freshman composition classes require students to respond to readings, it is not unusual for writing center tutors to find that the problems ESL students have in reading English also need to be addressed. Therefore, the focus of this paper is on types of tutorial activities which may prove beneficial when dealing with five major problems ESL students have in both reading and writing: 1) decoding, rather than reading for meaning, 2) summary writing, 3) accessing information from one's native language, 4) recognizing cultural preferences in rhetorical organization, and 5) understanding culture-bound rhetoric textbooks. The activities offered in this paper are based on an information-processing approach to language acquisition. This ap-

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proach, which is supported by cognitive and educational psychology researchers, such as Barry McLaughlin, Ellen Gagne', and John Anderson, accounts for language acquisition as part of a comprehensive model of learning (see Kennedy).

Freshman composition students are often asked to respond initially to a reading by summarizing the information provided. This task poses problems for a majority of ESL students. First, even advanced-level ESL students tend to decode when they read rather than read for meaning (McLaughlin *Theories*). This is a bottom-up approach to reading rather than top-down. Good readers, when reading for basic information, do not use the slow process of decoding each word and each syntactic structure; they read for meaning. As long ago as 1971, Frank Smith taught us that good readers sample the text; once they have predicted the upcoming information, they only sample meaning-bearing words in phrases and clauses to confirm their predictions. The only time good readers use the slower decoding process is when their predictions are not met; they then go back and decode in order to find their error. In an information-processing perspective, both decoding and reading-for-meaning processes are automatic (i.e., the processes themselves do not require conscious attention in good readers), and it appears that ESL students have not internalized the reading-for-meaning process. Moreover, another cognitive operation needs to develop to allow these students to recognize whether decoding or reading for meaning is the most efficient process to use. This cognitive operation is what McLaughlin terms restructuring ("Restructuring, "). The reading-for-meaning process, however, needs to become automatic before restructuring can take place (125-26). Reading for meaning is one skill that writing tutors can help ESL students to develop.

Second, although reading for meaning is one area that will aid ESL students in summary writing, Margaret Kirkland and Mary Anne Saunders have shown that even students who have learned to read in clauses and phrases rather than word-by-word still have problems translating what they read into a summary. They say that a top-down approach to reading must include the cognitive operation of superordination. Superordination allows the student to construct a "more general conceptual framework" (110) resulting from analysis and synthesis of the material read. They suggest that without superordination "many [students] rely on a bottom-up approach to reading comprehension, preventing them from getting 'the big picture' in planning and writing the summary, and potentially resulting in plagiarism" (111). Cherry Campbell's 1990 study reveals that most ESL students integrate text from sources primarily by copying and often without referencing even

though the ESL students had previously demonstrated the ability to paraphrase, summarize, quote, and integrate information from a source text into their compositions (225). The problem may be that students have not completely developed the superordination operation which would allow them to place information into a generalized framework.

According to an information-processing perspective, even if students demonstrates the ability to paraphrase or summarize in a few specific activities designed for teaching these skills, without an abundance of practice, their superordination operation will never become internalized. That is, many students will continue to use the bottom-up approach to reading and to organizing information from reading because these are more automatic processes. Thus, students need to be consciously focused on using their developing superordination operation until it also becomes automatic.

The implication for tutorials, then, is that students need to have practice. Developing activities that focus on reading for meaning is important. Asking students to skim and summarize meaning may be helpful, but students need first to be able to find the main idea of a passage, and then to read as quickly as possible, skipping prepositions, articles, and copulas. It may be beneficial to give students practice at reading only parts of content words and ask them to guess what the words are. Content words could be selected from reading assignments that the tutor knows will be used in the first-year composition classes in the near future. Students can then be asked to read paragraphs from the same passage that contain only parts of content words and to infer the meaning of each paragraph. Next, students move on to timed readings with partial words and sentences. They then move to full paragraphs that are timed. This could all be done with various sections of the same reading assignment. For example, consider the following paragraph taken from Verburg's *Ourselves Among Others*.

Fretting about the effects of day care on children has become a national preoccupation. What troubles lie ahead for a generation reared by strangers? What kind of adults will they become? "It is scaring everybody that a whole generation of children is being raised in a way that has never happened before," says Edward Sigler, professor of psychology at Yale and an authority on child care. At least one major survey of current research, by Penn State's Belsky, suggests that extensive day care in the first year of life raises the risk of emotional problems, a conclusion that has mortified already guilty parents. With high-quality supervision costing upwards of \$100 a week, many families are placing their children in the hands

of untrained, overworked personnel. “In some places, that means one woman taking care of nine babies,” says Zigler. “Nobody doing that can give them the stimulation they need. We encounter some real horror stories out there, with babies being tied into cribs.” (83-84)

Retaining only the necessary content words to get at the meaning yields a paragraph which looks something like the following:

Fretting effects day care children national preoccupation. troubles ahead generation reared strangers? adults become? “scaring everybody whole generation raised way never before,” Zigler, professor psychology authority child care. major survey current research, Belsky, suggests extensive day care first year raises risk emotional problems, mortified guilty parents. high-quality supervision costing \$100 week, many families placing children hands untrained, overworked personnel. “some places, means woman care nine babies,” Zigler. “Nobody give stimulation need. encounter horror stories, babies tied cribs.”

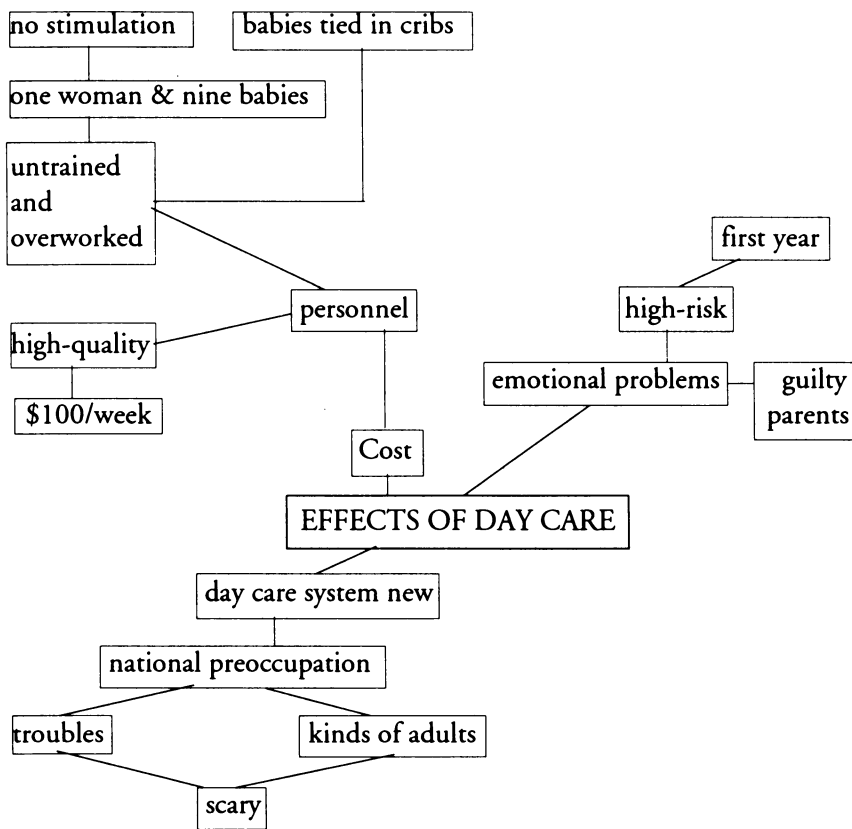
Getting rid of functional markers is the next step, i.e., reducing the content words to basic meaning. Some functional morphological structure should be retained. (You will notice in the paragraph above that the functional markers are underlined.) Initially, start by deleting every sixth or seventh marker. As the student demonstrates by comprehension that she or he is becoming better at predicting, more markers can be deleted. When a student is able to comprehend the majority of a passage with every second marker deleted, start limiting the amount of time the student has to complete the reading.

In order for this procedure to be effective, it needs to be repeated with many reading assignments. Last, students are asked to read full articles in a specified amount of time and to summarize the meaning. If a first-year composition program uses the same text over a period of several semesters or quarters, a number of these exercises could be developed and kept on file for future tutorial use.

Kirkland and Saunders offer other suggestions that can be applied in tutorials in order to develop the superordination operation. To encourage students to move from details to generalizations, they suggest listing details and asking students to supply the generalizations; e.g., give the details from a paragraph, and have students supply the topic sentence; give the main ideas which support the thesis, and have students supply the thesis (114). Another activity requires a student to read the material to be summarized the night

before. The next day during the tutorial session, the student creates an oral summary without referring to the text until later (115). This could be done in the writing center if tutors have regular appointments with students. Another strategy is teaching students to use a mapping technique after they read instead of outlining or notetaking as they read. Mapping requires students to put the ideas into diagrams that do not have the linear representation that outlining and notetaking do (115). Kirkland and Saunders stress that “sometimes it is necessary to rearrange the information to clarify it in a condensed form” (119). Mapping allows for this rearrangement prior to the creation of a written summary.

Using the same paragraph as shown in the deletion exercise, the following might be a map that could be drawn of its content:



The third problem that ESL students face deals with the invention stages

of writing. Alexander Friedlander cites Lay who indicates that allowing ESL students to use their native language in the prewriting stages of English composition is beneficial when 1) the topic relates to information students have gained through their native language or 2) when the topic is unfamiliar in either language (111). Prewriting in English is useful when information about a topic has been acquired in English, but often there is pertinent information which was learned through a student's native language as well. Friedlander turns to an information-processing model to justify encouraging students to prewrite in both their native language and in their second language, English. Working memory (one's conscious mind) has limited space, and information decays rapidly in working memory (111). If students are required to do all their prewriting in English, then information that is stored in the native language must be pulled from long-term memory and translated. This translation takes place in working memory and thus, takes up working memory space. This translation process severely limits the amount of information that can be held in working memory. Due to the time needed to translate and the rapid decay of working memory information, some of the information that is being held to be translated will be lost. Thus, the amount of prewriting text produced by ESL students will be reduced. When the topic employs information stored in both languages, retrieval and writing in prewriting activities could be done once in the students' native language and later translated into English (for native-language-related content), and also once in English (for English-related content). Since a two-part prewriting activity such as this is inappropriate in a class that contains both native and non-native speakers of English, because many of the native speakers may have no other language from which to access relevant information, encouraging this dual prewriting activity in the writing center could benefit ESL students greatly.

Fourth, I would like to address a problem relating to cultural differences. In 1966, Robert Kaplan looked at organization patterns of expository writing among various languages. He found that not only did rhetorical organization patterns differ, but also that ESL students tend to apply the composition organization pattern of their native language to writing in English even though the English pattern differs from that of their native language. In 1992 Beverly Lyon Clark and Sonja Wiedenaupt caution that Kaplan's diagrams oversimplify the directness which U.S. rhetoric is supposed to have, but they concede that the straight arrow which Kaplan uses to illustrate the directness of U.S. rhetoric does serve "as a metaphor of how U.S. academic writing" is said to require everything to be "to the point" (62). Kaplan makes clear that

discourse style is often determined by culture. Ilona Leki points out that we must realize that the rhetorical organization patterns do not reflect how people of various cultures think, but represent “culturally determined preferred discourse styles” (124). The main point to be made is that ESL students often transfer the style of writing they have been exposed to and have learned in their native language to composing in English.

Although native English speakers, such as Clark, qualify Kaplan’s description of the linear and direct quality of U.S. rhetorical patterns, in open discussions about writing patterns it becomes obvious that non-native English speakers see most types of U.S. writing as extremely linear and direct (Moragne e Silva). Native U.S. English speakers tend to employ more subordinate structures in their writing than coordinate structures, and, for the most part, digressions are considered irrelevant. However, Kaplan and others (Grabe and Kaplan, Purves, and Moragne) say that in Asian composition organization, it is preferable to be indirect, not stating the main point directly. In Semitic languages (e.g., Arabic and Hebrew) it is preferable to use coordinate structures rather than subordinate structures. In Romance languages, writers consider digressions relevant information and do not see what a U.S. English speaker considers to be peripheral as a digression at all. In Russian, writers appear to use a combination of characteristics from Semitic and Romance languages when they compose. Russian writers use very long sentences, as do writers of Semitic languages, and also incorporate digressions into their compositions, as do writers of Romance languages.

Discourse-structure problems result from a lack of sociolinguistic knowledge of cultural differences in rhetorical organization. ESL students may need to be made aware that their native-language rhetorical structure is as inappropriate in English-language compositions as English-language rhetorical structure would be in their native-language compositions. Kaplan wants us to realize that “cultural differences in the nature of rhetoric supply the key to the difference in teaching approach” (1).

For students whose native languages are Semitic or Russian, activities that require sentence combining, creating subordinate structures, or sentence decombining and then recombining would be helpful. Sentence combining activities can help to move students from using predominantly coordinate sentence structures to using significantly more subordinate sentence structures. To encourage directness and eliminate digressions, for students who are native speakers of Asian, Russian, or Romance languages, activities such as “Topic Structure Analysis” may be beneficial (for a detailed description of this activity, see Ulla Conner and Mary Farmer’s “The

Teaching of Topical Structure Analysis as a Revision Strategy for ESL Writers”). Briefly, in this activity the students identify the topic of each sentence in their compositions. They then determine if the progression of topics is parallel, sequential, or extended parallel. If the topic progression is parallel, then the topics of sentences that follow each other are the same, or synonymous. If the topic progression is sequential, then the topics of the sentences that follow each other are different. If the topic progression is extended parallel, then, for example, if there are four sentences, the first three sentences may show sequential progression, but the fourth sentence topic is the same or synonymous with the first sentence topic, thereby making the first and fourth sentence topics in the progression parallel. Students create a diagram of their compositions which illustrates the types of progression they have used in their compositions. An example given by Conner and Farmer is as follows:

Language and Community

(1) When a human infant is born into any community in any part of the world it has two things in common with any other infant, provided neither of them has been damaged in any way either before or during birth. (2) Firstly, and most obviously, new born children are completely helpless. (3) Apart from a powerful capacity to draw attention to their helplessness by using sound there is nothing the new born child can do to ensure his own survival. (4) Without care from some other human being or beings, be it mother, grandmother, sister, nurse, or human group, a child is very unlikely to survive. (5) This helplessness of human infants is in marked contrast with the capacity of many new born animals to get to their feet within minutes of birth and run with the herd within a few hours. (6) Although young animals are certainly at risk, sometimes for weeks or even months after birth, compared with the human infant they very quickly develop the capacity to fend for themselves. (7) It would seem that this long period of vulnerability is the price that the human species has to pay for the very long period which fits man for survival as species.

(8) It is during this very long period in which the human infant is totally dependent on others that it reveals the second feature which it shares with all other undamaged human infants, a capacity to learn language. (9) For this reason, biologists now suggest that language is ‘species specific’ to the human race, that is to say, they

consider the human infant to be genetically programmed in such a way that it can acquire language. (10) This suggestion implies that just as human beings are designed to see three-dimensionally and in colour, and just as they are designed to stand upright rather than to move on all fours, so they are designed to learn and use language as part of their normal development as well-formed human beings.

1. human infant
2. new born child
3. the new born child
4. a child
5. this helplessness of human infants
6. young animals
7. this long period of vulnerability
8. the human infant
9. language
10. human beings (129).

The topics of sentences 1-4 follow a parallel progression, while those of 4-7 follow a sequential progression, and those of 4-8 follow an extended parallel progression. The topic of sentence 8 is parallel with those of sentences 1-4 and with the topic of sentence 10. The topics of sentences 8-10 show an extended parallel progression, and the topics of sentences 8 and 9 show a sequential progression. The main topic is referred to again and again (i.e., topics of sentences 1, 2, 3, 4, 8, and 10). This is what tells students that their paper is cohesive and coherent. This technique gives students a visual representation of the unity, or lack of unity, in their compositions, and gives them a tool to use to revise their compositions for cohesion and coherence. Conner and Farmer caution that students should be made aware that it is possible to have progression representations in the diagram that look like sequential progression, when the sentences have little or nothing to do with one another. Therefore, students need to check their sequential progression sentences very carefully to insure a relationship to the main topic.

Another aspect of the problem of cultural differences is that U.S. culture-bound textbooks are often used in freshman composition classes. Writing center tutors may find that background-information about American culture is necessary to enable ESL students to fully understand the concepts presented in the readings and examples used in rhetoric textbooks. One illustration of this problem is a textbook titled *Rereading America*. The title for ESL students would more appropriately be *Reading America*. The text assumes a basic knowledge of American culture and requires students to dig

deeper into the readings for information about the United States that they may not have considered before. In addition, students are supposed to make connections among American ideas and values found in the readings that may have eluded them in the past, and they are instructed to write on what they find. The ESL students are required not only to do what the American students do, but they also have to gain the basic knowledge of American culture that the text assumes the students already possess. *Rereading America* is not an isolated example of culture-bound texts used for freshman composition.

This paper has addressed five major problems which ESL students have in their composition classes and has offered suggestions about how tutors in writing centers might handle these problems. At the University of Kentucky, our writing center offers sessions limited to non-native speakers. These sessions are conducted by one tutor who addresses a small group of non-native speakers at one time and employs activities such as these. We have found that it is a very efficient use of valuable tutorial time, and it effectively handles the problems that many ESL students have in common.

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