

1-1-1993

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Recommended Citation

Severino, Carol (1993) "ESL and Native-English Speaking Writers and Pedagogies-The Issue of Difference: A Review Essay," *Writing Center Journal*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 2, Article 8.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2832-9414.1285>

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ESL and Native-English Speaking Writers and Pedagogies—The Issue of Difference: A Review Essay

Carol Severino

Marie Wilson Nelson, *At the Point of Need: Teaching Basic and ESL Writers* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1991), 269 pages.

Ilona Leki, *Understanding ESL Writers: A Guide for Teachers* (Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1992), 151 pages.

What matters more when we teach or tutor in multicultural classrooms and writing centers: the similarities between native and non-native speakers of English or the differences between them? How can we design and carry out qualitative research to answer this and other questions about teaching writing? Anticipating these urgent inquiries about how to address the increasing diversity in our writing centers and classrooms, Boynton/Cook Publishers have responded with two books “at the point of need.” Following the rhetorical principle of James Britton’s pedagogy—that teaching is most effective at the time when the “audience” demonstrates a need for it—the writing center/composition communities stand to learn much from Marie Wilson Nelson’s *At the Point of Need* and Ilona Leki’s *Understanding ESL Writers*. Both can be incorporated into the teacher/tutor training curricula to fill large holes caused by the scarcity of helpful materials on linguistic diversity and the teaching of writing.

In addressing the urgent questions above, Nelson emphasizes the similarities between the writing processes and problems of native and non-native

The Writing Center Journal, Volume 13, Number 2, Spring 1993

speakers and recommends the same process-based, workshop approach for both populations. For ESL students, Leki also approves of the process approach used with native speakers, agreeing with Nelson that grouping ESL with non-ESL students works because of what they teach each other about one another's cultures (Leki 37). Mixed groups and process-based teaching, however, should not cause us to gloss over the important linguistic and cultural differences between ESL and non-ESL writers and between their writing processes and products. Although Nelson stresses the similarities between ESL and non-ESL groups and tends to dismiss the differences, Leki stresses those very differences, as well as the differences among the various sub-groups of the ESL population. Therefore, both books complement, but at some points, contradict one another.

The audiences for these books intersect. Countering the complaint that writing centers don't engage in rigorous research, *At the Point of Need* (a "research story" encompassing five years, five research teams, and ninety student groups) is written for teachers/tutors in multicultural or more homogeneous settings, but especially those preparing to do teacher research. In contrast, *Understanding ESL Writers* is a must read in orientation programs/courses for new or experienced writing teachers and tutors with insufficient knowledge about and experience with ESL writers.

Both Nelson and Leki enthusiastically communicate the joys and rewards of writing center and ESL work, a contagious zeal firmly grounded in the realities of their everyday experience with writers and teachers in the U.S. and abroad. Whereas Nelson is arguing for holistic research and whole-language teaching, Leki is arguing for a particular understanding of cultural relativity.

In richly detailed, lively, and readable prose, Nelson narrates the process of "recursive, collaborative, and cumulative" (Nelson 16) teacher-driven qualitative research. She shows how research and pedagogy are intimately bound; effective teaching, program construction, curriculum development, and educational policy-making must be research driven. By "research" she does not mean one-shot post-test measurements but multiple means of data collection and assessment. These include careful observations of students' progress, copious writing in logs, exhaustive discussion of the log entries followed by further observations, taped and transcribed writing conferences, writing apprehension test scores and analyses of student writings.

Nelson and her graduate student tutors isolate for us patterns in the group interaction and learning. They stress two principles which continually surfaced in the study—trust your own writing experience and trust the

student—or as she and her staff say, “follow the kid.”

Nelson’s hypothesis about process pedagogy for ESL writers shows that she was a woman ahead of her time. When she began grouping ESL students with native speakers in a process-based curriculum a decade ago, this approach was not the norm. As Leki explains, process approaches are more widespread but are still controversial because of the alleged ethnocentric focus on personal writing to the detriment of the academic discourse ESL students need to survive in their disciplines (Leki 6-7).

Through observation, log-writing, and discussion of the mixed groups of students, Nelson and her tutors discerned that both native-speakers and non-native speakers had the same problems: self-censoring personal information (a natural reluctance to reveal too much of themselves to group members whom they didn’t know well yet) and over-monitoring of structural matters due to previous instruction that over-emphasized formal concerns. Apparently, two weeks of observing commonalities between ESL and non-ESL writers was enough to convince the tutors and Nelson of the soundness of the approach. Of course, as Nelson herself would admit, perceptions are influenced by the lenses through which researchers make their observations. Of the tutors’ “conversion,” Nelson writes

No longer did they believe ESL and basic writers should be treated differently and for the next four and one half years of the study, tutors continued to treat the two groups the same. From this point, I will also stop distinguishing, and unless I state otherwise, the term basic writers will refer to both groups. (47)

“Not so fast!” readers will protest, especially those who have worked with both ESL and native-speaker populations. Nelson has made two quick leaps: (1) because both populations have similar problems as writers, they should be treated the same; and, (2) because they are treated the same, ESL writers should be included in the category of basic writers.

Experience, intuition, and research, including Leki’s, tell us that the cultural and linguistic differences between basic and ESL writers are too complex to be taken so lightly. Nelson’s Principle of Diversity like her Principle of Similarity, both derived from her teams’ observations, seems to deny the reality of cultural differences. Although process pedagogy in Nelson’s story is successful with mixed groups, it is still culturally relative, not universal.

Nelson’s tendency to glide over complexities leaves us with several unanswered questions. For example, the staff’s concern about academic

writing evaporated for students whose writing center work consisted of personal writing. How exactly did this happen? By not explaining the attitudinal and cognitive changes that must have taken place, is Nelson saying that confidence and success in personal writing automatically translate into confidence and success in academic writing? Such an interpretation is too simple in light of the struggles that fluent expressive writers often have when they begin to write about their reading, a task that involves different challenges and, as Linda Flower has shown (1987), different cognitive processes. Avoiding these complexities occasionally taints this teacher-research story with an aura of Hollywood pedagogy. Even the most roseate among us may be bothered by the plethora of happy academic endings for tutors and students in *At the Point of Need*.

Unfortunately, the story of the writing center itself does not end happily. In chapter nine, Nelson shocks us with the revelation that her writing center has been dismantled (256), but she does not explain what happened and why. An analysis of the institutional factors that caused its demise would be extremely helpful to writing center personnel battling for survival or anticipating skirmishes with departments and administrations. Nelson alludes to political and hierarchical issues, to the fact that conflicting ESL writing pedagogies were operating at the same time in the university's language programs. Did supporters of a parts-to-wholes paradigm finally win? If so, why is parts-to-wholes often the favored language pedagogy of those in power? We are left wondering why a center that was so successful in its teaching and research was terminated.

Although Nelson and Leki share an interest in teaching ESL writers, Leki's project is quite different. Unlike Nelson, she is not arguing for a particular research or teaching approach but for a particular stance toward ESL writers. As her title indicates, her goal is that composition teachers acquire a deeper understanding and appreciation of ESL students' backgrounds, their writing, and the relationships between the two. This "glimpse of the real people behind the role of writing student" (xii) is based on a knowledge of cultural and linguistic *differences*, which Leki stresses, as contrasted with Nelson, who emphasizes cultural similarities and individual differences.

Leki tells us how myths and misconceptions can harm immigrant and international ESL students, possibly exacerbating the culture conflict or culture shock they may already be experiencing in the U.S. (46). For example, a common misunderstanding of ESL writing—that it contains extra errors that require extra work—contributes to an unwelcoming attitude

on the part of the writing teacher/tutor. Leki counters this misunderstanding by explaining theories of second-language acquisition, by demonstrating the cultural and linguistic sources of various levels of “errors,” and by pointing out sentence-level error patterns teachers can expect to find in ESL writing. She cites research suggesting that correcting all of the textual errors, even if ESL students request it, is not an effective teaching strategy.

Instead, like Nelson, Leki assures composition teachers that the process-based strategies with which they are already familiar are the most effective approaches. However, and here is where Nelson and Leki diverge, these approaches *must be adjusted* to ESL students’ cultural backgrounds and linguistic needs. ESL students need more experience and practice than native speakers with rhetorical conventions, vocabulary, grammatical structures, the print code, and with reading and writing in general (Leki 37). Typical composition classroom procedures may need adjustment as well. Calling on individual students and urging in a public classroom forum that they speak up and disagree with the teacher and with one another, requiring that they defend an unpopular culturally based argument (for example, about fitting punishments for crimes or about the role of the woman in the family) may disparage, insult, and isolate ESL-students accustomed to a teacher-dominated and group-oriented (as opposed to individual-oriented) educational system.

In chapter eight, “Contrastive Rhetoric,” she discusses the various rhetorical conventions and expectations of students from other nations to counter our ethnocentrism about what constitutes good writing. This chapter, like the others, ends with a helpful conclusion, of which the following is a part. I quote it because the passage communicates the nature of Leki’s stance toward ESL writers, a stance that her readers cannot help but adopt after reading this book:

ESL students often exhibit an admirable and refreshing commitment to task. Much of their writing is a joy to read, filled with startling uses of English and details, sometimes fascinating, sometimes horrifying, of their lives in other worlds. But most compelling may be the bracing reminder to ourselves, and, in mixed native/non-native writing classes, to our native students of the *relativity of our own realities*. (75) [emphasis mine]

Leki accomplishes her goal to increase our understanding of ESL writers through lucid explanations of theories of second language-learning and composing and well-placed, often humorous examples and anecdotes about

interactions with students from different countries, proving that knowledge can emerge from what Stephen North calls teachers' lore (1987). A little cultural knowledge, however, can be a dangerous thing if we fool ourselves into thinking that now that we have read Leki's 141 pages, we know all about ESL students and how to teach them. Writing center tutors and classroom teachers are likely to encounter students from twenty or more different countries each semester. Leki's book is only a beginning. We must continue to educate ourselves about our students' cultural and literacy backgrounds by interviewing them and talking with them one-on-one about their experiences and their writing to get a picture of their interlanguage (Leki 131), by assigning them challenging cultural topics on which to inform us through their writing, and by consulting the extensive bibliography Leki provides at the end of the book.

Leki contrasts the needs and expectations, strengths and weaknesses of international students with those of immigrant ESL students. While international students might be returning to their countries, immigrant students are here to stay. The former are often proficient writers in their own languages and even in English but might not be as fluent in speaking. Immigrant students, however, are more likely to be more fluent speakers, but not as fluent writers (Leki 42).

Leki provides some helpful observations about international students. Japanese writers might demonstrate a preference for indirectness in their explanations, for a specific-to-general organizational pattern, and for returning repeatedly to a "baseline theme." Chinese writers might use more proverbs, metaphors, and literary and historical preferences. Arabic writers rely on co-ordination rather than subordination, Spanish-speakers on ornamentation. The fact that the U.S. definition of plagiarism is also culturally relative may cause problems if teachers don't realize that ESL students who copy from prepared texts do so for various complex reasons that involve their respect for thoughtful, well-crafted writing, not in order to deceive the teacher.

Leki directly confronts many issues of difference that Nelson avoids. Most helpful is her reminder about the cultural relativity of our own composition pedagogy. The staples of U.S. composition—expressive writing about oneself, argumentative writing and discussion about controversial social issues, for example, male-female relationships, and peer-response-group activities—might also cause cultural dissonance for students from cultures that don't value individualism and equality between the sexes as much as we do in the U.S. Extended writing about the self is considered

immodest and boorish in some Asian cultures; in Japan, coming directly to the point with theses at the beginning of the paper and topic sentences at the beginning of each paragraph is often considered rude and insulting to the intelligence of one's audience.

Leki also contrasts both ESL groups, international and immigrant, to native speaker populations—basic writers and Standard English as a Second Dialect (SESD) speakers—but, unfortunately, not without stereotyping the latter two groups. SESD students (also called Black English Vernacular speakers), she says, come from economic ghettos, are underprepared for school, and apprehensive about writing. They are characterized as victims of a poor educational system suffering from a history of negative experiences with literacy that have contributed to their low self-esteem. Contrasting them with ESL students, Leki writes, “SESD students...have had plenty of experiences with writing, most of them bad” (30). In some paragraphs Leki seems to be equating basic writers with SESD speakers (34, 37), whereas the two groups overlap but are not one and the same.

While some, even all, of these characteristics may apply to *some* basic writers and SESD speakers, just as many students labeled “basic writers” by their institutions would *not* meet most of these criteria. “Plenty of experiences with writing?” According to Arthur Applebee’s national survey which showed that only 3% of high school students’ time is spent writing a paragraph or more (1984), few U.S. high school graduates could claim plenty of writing experiences. “Most of them bad?” Through my years of teaching and researching basic writers and SESD speakers—analyzing literacy histories and Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension test scores—I have encountered many SESD speakers and basic writers with positive attitudes toward and experiences with reading and writing inside and outside of school, students with high self-esteem, students who have used writing in their lives outside of school for expressive and exploratory purposes (Severino). They’ve been labeled basic writers variously because of lower standardized tests, lack of experience with writing, and/or frequent surface errors.

Leki is more up front about the politics of ESL instruction than Nelson. She discusses the dangers of academic colonialism—imposing an individualistic composition pedagogy on those whose culture resists it, or using the findings of contrastive rhetoric or contrastive analysis to “native-speakerize” ESL prose, to assimilate and Americanize ESL writers. She calls somewhat vaguely for “a pluralistic society courageous enough truly to embrace its definition of itself” (133). However, we are not sure if or how much she aligns herself with the movement she describes among ESL teachers: to change

native-speaking readers and evaluators so that they read “with a more cosmopolitan, less parochial eye” (133) rather than trying to change ESL writers and their texts to conform to U.S. rhetorical ways. She deals with these highly charged matters only briefly; for as I pointed out, the book is an introduction to ESL writers and accompanying cultural, linguistic, and political issues. As such, it is an important component of any teacher/tutor training experience.

At the Point of Need and *Understanding ESL Writers*, both welcome additions to our research and teaching repertoires, have auspiciously arrived at the point when we need answers to questions about our work in multicultural classrooms and writing centers, even answers that sometimes contradict one another.

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