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Review: Approaches to Teaching Non-Native English Speakers Across the Curriculum

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Sigsbee, David L, Bruce W. Speck, and Bruce Maylath, eds.
Approaches to Teaching Non-Native English Speakers Across
the Curriculum. Number 70. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass
Publishers, Summer, 1997.

Reviewed by Carol Severino

As the 70th volume in a series, *Approaches* shares the qualities of the other short sourcebooks that comprise Jossey-Bass's series *New Directions in Teaching and Learning*: substance, clarity, accessibility, as well as the philosophy that reflective teaching, like formal research, is a form of scholarship that involves translating from research and theory to practice and back again. Because these assumptions are shared by the composition and writing center communities, *WCJ* readers will find themselves agreeing with and applauding the strategies *Approaches* recommends for working with non-native speakers of English. Most of the authors are not from English-as-a-Native-Language-Composition, but from linguistics, ESL, interpersonal communication, oral communication, and editing and technical writing; therefore, writing teachers and tutors will receive from these other areas confirmation of the effectiveness of responding to content and treating writing as an act of communication.

Yet, writing center workers will not only confirm what they already know when they read Sigsbee, Speck, and Maylath's collection; they will learn much about language and culture that is new and useful in tutoring and teaching ESL as well as native-English speaking students. The book's primary audience is classroom teachers who are not English teachers or ESL specialists, especially teachers in content-area courses such as psychology and chemistry who, the editors say, "user-tested" drafts of the chapters. For writing centers which help this audience as part of a writing-across-the-curriculum or teacher-center program, this book is especially useful. However, because it is also a font of information about cross-cultural differences in communication and advice about working with non-native speakers of English, it is also helpful in tutoring and tutor-training. Writing centers are mentioned frequently as available resources for referrals of non-native speakers, so writing center staff will sometimes feel like they are eavesdropping. However, readers will be pleased that the authors emphasize what classroom teachers themselves can do to accommodate the cultural and linguistic differences so that writing centers are not burdened with compensating for the mistakes that result from instructors' cross-cultural obliviousness.

Approaches is refreshingly clear, accessible, and well-edited. Summaries of each of the eleven articles appear in both the table of

contents and at the top of the first page of each article. Each article can be read independently, but the book is a coherent whole; the authors read one another's articles and cross-references are provided throughout. Articles about broad issues (differences in different English dialects, in different non-native speakers, in religion) comprise the first half of the book and more specific issues and applications (to grammar errors, class participation, group work, teaching style) appear in the second half. The editors prefer that readers begin with the first article "My Language, My Culture: International Variations in Standards for English" by James Stalker, so I will do so too.

Stalker's article may be one of the most eye-opening for writing center tutors because it explains dialect differences between American English and other World Englishes—Indian English (which has 75 million native speakers), British English, Malaysian English, Turkish English, etc. British English is the variant taught most in the world because British textbooks and British-style instruction are more readily available than American texts and instruction. Many of the "errors" that American teachers and tutors correct are indeed not errors at all, but dialect features; for example, "researches" is acceptable in every dialect of English except American. (I hope readers haven't "corrected" this non-error as many times as I have.) Stalker points out that while an American resident lives *on* Milford St., a British one lives *in* Milford St. and that the words "entertainment," "lettuce," and "attendance" have a plural in Malaysian English. Stalker, like the other authors in this collection, recommends that teachers and tutors respond to writing as a communicative act, and that if they do respond to word forms, they ask themselves and their students whether the features in question are really errors or acceptable features of other Englishes. He also points out the common resistance to fluency in American English when students anticipate feeling stigmatized by perceived "Americanization" upon returning to their home countries.

Joy Reid's "Which Non-native Speaker? Differences Between International Students and U.S. Resident (Language Minority) Students" also helps tutors by contrasting the above two groups' language learning and language problems. Reid explains that while international students are often literate in their first language, their listening and speaking skills need more practice; immigrants and refugees, on the other hand, have developed a conversational, ear-based language with self-developed "rules." She analyzes a writing sample of a Vietnamese student with the help of the student herself whom she interviewed about the paper. Errors such as confusion between "why" and "while" illustrate ear-based features. Reid also shows readers how to interpret TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and TWE (Test of Written English) scores. Asian students will often score well on the TOEFL grammar and reading sections (e.g., 580) but less well on listening skills (e.g., 480). A TWE

score of 4.5 or greater out of 6 indicates the student is familiar with topic sentences and supporting detail.

The next article with the most unusual title, Bruce Maylath's "Why Do They Get It When I Say 'Gingivitis' but Not When I Say 'Gum-Swelling'?" explains why ESL students who speak romance languages understand English words with Latin and Greek derivation such as *gingivitis*, but may not understand words of Anglo-Saxon derivation such as "gum," many of which have more than one meaning. Native English-speakers will, of course, understand the latter, but perhaps have trouble with the former, and for international students from Asia, Maylath tells us, almost all English words might seem opaque at first. He recommends that teachers explain concepts and processes in two ways in their lectures—in an academic Greek and Latin based style and in a colloquial Anglo-Saxon style, a good strategy for teaching and tutoring both native and non-native speakers of English. Analogously, he lists a few of the redundant legalese pairs from Germanic and Roman sources: last will and testament, breaking and entering, deem and consider, shun and avoid.

Another eye-opening article is Bruce W. Speck's "Respect for Religious Differences: The Case of Muslim Students" based on interviews with four Muslim students willing to talk about the prejudices of their instructors who believed they are being tolerant. One such prejudice was judging Muslims from all countries based on the more restrictive policies of one, for example, laws regulating the attire of women in Saudi Arabia. Discrimination against Muslims in the classroom (commonly for practices regarding fasting, prayer, polygamy, and punishment) is especially harmful and unfair since many Muslim students do not possess the vocabulary to defend themselves and their religion. Speck reminds us that Islam is the world's fastest growing religion.

The remainder of the book is filled with good advice about writing processes, especially workshopping, editing, and correcting, and more useful information about cross-cultural differences. Some of the advice about writing processes will be familiar to writing center tutors: ESL students, like native-speakers of English, should get help during the planning stages of a paper to avoid spending hours on an unfocused project. Premature editing by a teacher or tutor can hinder an ESL (or native English speaking) student's writing process. Focus on a few types of errors; other errors should be tolerated. Overcorrecting by the teacher (or tutors) does not help a student self-correct.

Based on her empirical studies, Gayle Nelson points out how cultural differences can affect the workshopping process; students from collectivist rather than individualist societies with greater distance between teacher and student often think they are not capable of helping their classmates and don't want to criticize them in order to save face and preserve group harmony. To accommodate these cultural differences,

Nelson recommends working in pairs (as in a writing center!) rather than in groups. Nelson and Barbara Hodne point out that whereas American students are comfortable thinking aloud and speaking up, many Asian students are not. While we value “telling it like it is” and are suspicious of people who refrain from saying what they think, many other cultures value indirect, subtle communication styles.

Even though *Approaches* is oriented to classrooms and classroom instructors, many tutors and all ESL writing center students work also in classrooms. The latter sometimes come to the writing center because of these very same classroom problems in poor cross-cultural communication and non-incorporation of the writing process explained here. Because of these varied classroom-writing center connections, *Approaches* belongs on every writing center (or teaching center) bookshelf.

Carol Severino, Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Director of the Writing Center at the University of Iowa, teaches and researches about the relationships between writing, culture, pedagogy, and politics. With Juan Guerra and Johnella Butler, she co-edited *Writing in Multicultural Settings* (Modern Language Association, 1997).