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Review: Landmark Essays on ESL Writing

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Silva, Tony, and Paul Kei Matsuda, eds. *Landmark Essays on ESL Writing*. Mahwah, NJ: Pergamon, 2001.

Reviewed by Melinda Reichelt

Addressing readers who are for the most part familiar with first language (English) writing research and theory, *Landmark Essays on ESL Writing* provides an excellent chronological overview of the historical development of research in the field of ESL writing, especially for writing center specialists who focus on first language composition and want to bring themselves up to date on ESL composition issues. While they will probably want to sample the chapters of the book that seem most appealing to them, *WCJ* readers, especially those unfamiliar with the literature on ESL writing, are advised to start with the editors' introduction. Starting with the introduction to the volume will help the readers to place the other chapters in their historical context and learn of subsequent critiques and responses, thus avoiding the pitfall of taking the information in each section at face value. As the title of the volume indicates, the chapters in the book represent landmark essays in the field of ESL writing, those that were state-of-the-art when published, but might not be so now. For writing center specialists familiar with first language writing research, this volume's information about the connections between second language writing scholarship, text linguistics, and second language teaching will likely prove enlightening. However, the primary value of the volume for writing center specialists lies in the information it provides about the distinct nature of second language writing research and second language writers themselves.

The volume includes sixteen chapters in addition to the introduction. Drawing on my experience as an ESL writing specialist and several years' experience as a writing center tutor, I have selected several chapters from this volume that might be of particular interest to *WCJ* readers.

Chapter 13, Silva's (1993) "Toward an Understanding of the Distinct Nature of L2 Writing: The ESL Research and its Implications," provides a good overview of the differences between native English speaking writers and ESL writers. First, Silva notes that while ESL and native English speaking writers alike employ a recursive composing process in order to plan, write, and revise their ideas, many differences exist between the two groups. Based on the body of comparative research available at the time of publication, Silva outlines the two groups' differences in terms of composing processes and textual features. Results indicate that, in general, composing in a second language is "more

constrained, more difficult, and less effective” and that texts are “less fluent (fewer words), less accurate (more errors), and less effective (lower holistic scores)” (200). Silva makes an important point for writing center specialists: Second language writers may need more of everything, including more time spent on planning, revising, and editing. Based on this information, writing center tutors may decide to spend an entire ESL tutorial focused on a single aspect of the writing process, such as planning, or encourage ESL writers to visit the writing center several times to work on revision or editing of a given paper.

After reading Silva’s chapter, readers might proceed to Chapter 2, Kaplan’s (1966) “Cultural Thought Patterns in Inter-Cultural Education,” an article oft-cited in discussions of contrastive rhetoric, an area which explores the notion that, due to cultural and linguistic differences, the nature of written discourse varies from culture to culture. (Readers may be familiar with Kaplan’s “doodles,” which he uses to illustrate visually the rhetorics of other cultures, and which have been reproduced in many books and articles.) Despite the article’s shortcomings, including problems with data collection and stereotyping, the article points to the important notion that students’ first languages may exert influence on their second-language writing not only on the grammatical level but also on the rhetorical level. This holds important possibilities for writing center tutors, but they should be cautious about following all of Kaplan’s pedagogical advice; as the historical placement of the chapter indicates, many of Kaplan’s ideas have since been critiqued as being overly prescriptive.

Next, *WCJ* readers might read Chapter 5, Hinds’ (1987) “Reader-Writer Responsibility: A New Typology.” Classifying English-language writing as writer-responsible and Japanese as reader-responsible, Hinds argues that first language rhetorical conventions may influence a second language writer’s decisions about degree of explicitness in their writing—not only in terms of how much ambiguity is tolerated or desired in a statement in a text, but also in terms of how explicit writers are in demonstrating the coherence, or unity, of their text. Hinds illustrates his ideas with information about relevant features of written Japanese; his ideas should expand writing center tutors’ perceptions of texts that may at first glance seem simply unclear and/or disjointed.

Chapter 10, Carson’s (1992) “Becoming Biliterate: First Language Influences,” is a good follow-up to these chapters. In it, Carson describes three aspects of literacy learning in Japan and China: the social context of schooling, cognitive considerations of acquiring the first-language writing system, and pedagogical practices of the home culture. This chapter provides the writing center specialist with insight into how any ESL student’s expectations, based on their first language reading and

writing backgrounds, might not match with approaches to writing instruction in other countries. For writing center tutors, who may encounter such mismatches in tutorials, such information reminds us to deal with such situations more sensitively in order to be effective.

Finally, a must-read in this volume is Chapter 16, Matsuda's (1997) "Contrastive Rhetoric in Context: A Dynamic Model of L2 Writing." In it, the author reviews three explanations described in the contrastive rhetoric literature as accounting for lack of coherence in ESL writers' texts: linguistic, cultural, and educational factors. After critiquing some of the assumptions on which these explanations are based, Matsuda proposes an alternative, dynamic model of second language writing that takes into consideration not only these three factors, but also the complexity of factors that influence a writer's decisions about how to respond to a particular writing context. According to Matsuda, some of these factors include "knowledge of the subject matter, past interactions with the reader, and the writer's membership to various L1 [first language] and L2 [second language] discourse communities" (248). The model Matsuda proposes also includes readers, who may broaden or change their expectations through exposure to second language writers' texts; Matsuda argues, in fact, that the presence of second language writers' texts can transform the first-language discourse community into one that is more pluralistic. This chapter provides writing center specialists with up-to-date information about contrastive rhetoric that can be applied to writing tutorials: In tutoring ESL students, it is not necessary to impose prescribed "western" rhetorical forms on students, but rather to help students to make decisions in their writing as they respond to a particular writing context—one which includes their first- and second-language writing experiences as well as the (perhaps) evolving expectations of their readers. *WCJ* readers interested in contrastive rhetoric might also refer to Ilona Leki's (1991) article "Twenty-Five Years of Contrastive Rhetoric: Text Analysis and Writing Pedagogies" and Ulla Connor's (1996) volume *Contrastive Rhetoric: Cross-Cultural Aspects of Second-Language Writing*.

While not all of the chapters in *Landmark Essays on ESL Writing* have direct relevance to writing center concerns, the volume provides an excellent introduction to (or review of) the field of ESL writing; additionally, the chapters described above offer a sequence of readings that will bring writing center specialists up to speed on an important and rapidly expanding field.

Melinda Reichelt is an Assistant Professor English at the University of Toledo, where she teaches ESL writing, linguistics, and TESOL courses. Her research focuses on second language writing, and she has published articles in *The Journal of Second Language Writing*, *TESOL Journal*, *ELT Journal*, and *International Education*. She is co-author with Tony Silva and Colleen Brice of *Annotated Bibliography of Scholarship in Second Language Writing: 1993-1997* (Stamford, CT: Ablex, 1999).