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Review: ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors

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Review: *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*, 2nd ed.
Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth, eds.
Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2009.

by Terese Thonus

About the Author

Terese Thonus has directed the KU Writing Center at the University of Kansas since 2007. She holds a PhD in linguistics from Indiana University, Bloomington. She has fourteen years' experience as an ESL/EFL instructor and teacher educator in Brazil, Thailand, and the US as well as ten years' experience teaching in MA Linguistics/TESOL programs and ten years' experience as a writing tutor. Terese has published and presented on writing center interaction, especially between tutors and English L2 writers.

Winner of the 2005 International Writing Centers Association's Outstanding Scholarship Award, *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors* did very well in its first edition, selling over 4,000 copies (Rafoth). Why then, a second edition? In the introduction to the volume, Bruce and Rafoth acknowledge that, like all good writers and writing center tutors, they received valuable feedback from their readers that encouraged rewriting and revision. The continued "urgent need for trained tutors to work with ESL writers, both in the United States and around the world" (xii) was no doubt additional motivation to update and expand the first edition.

Contributions to the volume are organized into three parts: "Becoming Oriented to Second Language Learners," "The ESL Tutoring Session," and "A Broader View." In the first section, Tseng's "Theoretical Perspectives on Learning a Second Language" was, unfortunately, not replaced by a more specific chapter on second

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language writing (see my review of the first edition). Noticeably absent in this second edition is Gillespie's "Is This My Job?" an omission that speaks powerfully to the frank acceptance of the need for ESL tutoring in US college and university writing centers—and the need for all tutors to be equipped to provide it. Two new chapters in the second section are Deckert's on English articles and the nicely illustrated Breuch and Clemens piece, "Tutoring ESL Students in Online Hybrid (Synchronous and Asynchronous) Writing Centers."

As the editors claim, the second edition of the *Guide* "does a better job of reflecting the diversity among writers and tutors" (ix). They have done this from the outset by substituting what was a brief foreword by Ilona Leki in the first edition with a complete chapter, "Before the Conversation: a Sketch of Some Possible Backgrounds, Experiences, and Attitudes among ESL Students Visiting a Writing Center." Leki brings years of experience as a teacher of college-level ESL writing, trainer of international graduate teaching assistants, and editor of the *Journal of Second Language Writing* to bear on her short but detailed description of the multilingual writers who use university writing centers. Ritter and Sandvik's chapter, also new to this edition, focuses specifically on "Generation 1.5" or immigrant writers, who, as "ear learners," require tutors who are "models and scaffolds" (99) to help them make the leap to academic writing. Bruce and Rafoth round out their exploration of diversity with Chapter 16, Bergmann et al.'s "Be a Linguistic Foreigner: Learning from International Tutoring," which reports on a tutor exchange between two American university writing centers and various tutoring sites at universities in Germany and Sweden. The term "exchange" is deceptive in this context, though, as no students from these institutions tutored in the California State University, San Bernardino or Purdue University writing centers. Nonetheless, the experiences of Americans abroad will no doubt enrich the culture of these writing centers, and if the authors have their way, they'll "do it again" (206). I hope that in the third edition of this book, Bruce and Rafoth will go even farther afield by including a chapter on the ESL (or more particularly, EFL) tutoring practices at writing centers in Asia such as those at Seoul National University and Waseda University (Johnston, Cornwell, and Yoshida) and in the Middle East

(Middle East-North Africa Writing Centers Alliance).

The editors describe the volume as “a companion for tutors who work with non-native English-speaking writers at the college or university level” (x). Readers can use it “to gain a better understanding of important concepts and best practices,” “to get ideas for dealing with a specific challenge,” “to stimulate thinking and discussion,” and “to discover sources for further reading.” Because some of the best chapters synthesize key concepts—e.g., Matsuda and Cox’s “Reading an ESL Writer’s Text”—and best practices—e.g., Severino’s “Avoiding Appropriation”—the editors certainly meet their first goal. Chapters such as Bouman’s excellent (though dated) “Raising Questions about Plagiarism” and Linville’s “Editing Line by Line” accomplish the second goal. Works cited lists at the end of most articles do indeed point readers to valuable additional reading; however, the absence of discussion questions might make some chapters less accessible to those writing center directors and tutors new to working with ESL writers.

To cap off the new edition, both Bruce and Rafoth contribute chapters of their own on the topic of what tutors can learn from working with second-language writers. Rafoth’s chapter, “English for Those Who (Think They) Already Know It,” argues that writing centers are viewed by English learners as “language centers,” and that this is not necessarily an incorrect impression: “They hope to find a place where they can interact with native speakers and discuss aspects of the language that puzzled them” (213). He concludes that native English-speaking tutors can learn a great deal about their own language by making the effort to “understand English from a linguistic perspective and bring this understanding to the writing conference” (209). Bruce’s chapter, “Listening to and Learning from ESL Writers,” shares conversations she had with four second-language writers from diverse backgrounds about their experiences in university writing centers in the Northeast. In relating each of these, Bruce refers to earlier chapters in the edited volume. Her purpose is “to return the focus of the collection from theories of culture and linguistic concerns to the individual student because, after all, that is what our work and this publication are ultimately about” (217).

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While this statement reminds us that the construct “ESL students” is extremely broad and that each individual presents unique writing needs, in this second edition of *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*, Bruce and Rafoth have not obscured the generalizations so valuable to the practice of tutors who, increasingly, work in writing centers serving ever-growing multilingual populations.

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