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Terese Thonus

Review of *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers*, by Ben Rafoth

If I were asked to write a cover blurb for *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers*, it would begin this way: “This is the book I wish I had written, but Ben Rafoth beat me to it, and he’s done a far better job than I ever could have!” Putting envy aside, I argue that Rafoth has succeeded in writing an accessible volume on a difficult topic and perfectly timed its publication. Most importantly, *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers* recognizes that multilingualism and ESL writing and writers cannot be ignored by writing centers. Rafoth understands that writing centers are not only the *last* resort of multilingual writers on a campus, but often the *only* resort.

This discussion of multilingual writers and writing centers references research in composition, communication studies, applied linguistics, second language writing, and TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages). By reading this book, administrators and tutors enter the conversation on multilingual writing, learning terminology and approaches they can apply directly to their practice in the writing center. Rafoth makes sure his explanations are within reach of those unfamiliar with these fields. A case in point is the concept of *fossilization*: “Once something is learned, it tends to stick with you even if you learned it incorrectly” (p. 72).

The book is comprised of an introduction and five chapters, ending with a two-page glossary of terms and an extensive reference list. Rafoth used published research, his experience as a teacher of writing and director of the Indiana University of Pennsylvania Writing Center,

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and interviews with directors, tutors, students, and instructors at writing centers in the U.S. and abroad as source material. He wisely notes that the book is neither a formal research study nor a tutor handbook. Instead, it “offers an informed invitation to writing center directors and their tutors...to make greater use of theory and research from the field of second language acquisition, particularly as it relates to one-to-one interaction, academic discourse, and providing corrective feedback” (p. 3). *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers* “is a call to directors to ask more of their tutors and themselves” (p. 6). And Rafoth is adamant that directors must learn what they need to know in order to educate their tutors:

Do we know what the strategic knowledge is and how we try to teach it to our tutors? Have we taught them, for example, how to gain a sense of what writers know and can accomplish on their own versus only with help? Do directors know enough about the structures of English to be able to recognize and discuss forms and functions at the level of phrases, clauses, and larger pieces of discourse? (p. 13)

Rafoth insists that his readers understand that tutors are not going to learn how to consult with multilingual writers by osmosis or by learning a few “best practices.”

The first chapter, “The Changing Faces of Writing Centers,” profiles writing centers around the world, from King Abdulaziz University in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, to Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa. Rafoth uses these contexts to describe what “multilingual” means—as opposed to “ESL,” “ELL,” or “L2.” Further, these contexts expand our notions of what “tutoring writing” means—whether switching from English to Spanish to reduce a community college student’s anxiety or offering online writing resources to Maori students spread across New Zealand. The author’s actual and virtual travels to writing centers in the U.S., Europe, and the Middle East (surprisingly, none in Asia) provide a rich tapestry, “a glimpse of writing centers as they operate today, and they give you a hint of the linguistic and cultural diversity headed to a writing center near you” (p. 20).

In “Learning from Interaction,” Rafoth contrasts the experience of learning a first language with that of learning additional languages. This leads to a discussion of native-speaker privilege as it relates to the lived experience of multilingual writers. Further into the chapter, Rafoth explains comprehensible input/output, transfer, and interlanguage, crucial concepts in understanding the language learning process. He also investigates “engagement” from the perspective of second language acquisition and communication studies. Using transcripts from actual

tutorials, he explores the counterintuitive insight that miscommunication in writing center tutorials is desirable for creating opportunities for negotiated interaction.

“Academic Writing” situates second language acquisition within college-level writing and content instruction. One of the author’s main arguments is that multilingual writers’ lexical development must be an important focus of writing center sessions. Linguists who have studied large corpora of the English language have demonstrated that given the relatively small number of high-frequency headwords in academic vocabulary, such facilitated development is possible. Rafoth then discusses writing in the disciplines and the imperative for scholars to publish in English, completing the section with a story about a workshop for faculty at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The chapter concludes with sections about metatext, lexical density, vocabulary (again), translation, and postmodern approaches to tutoring. I question the sequencing of topics within this chapter, but perhaps the final organization resulted from Rafoth’s desire to bridge unfamiliar theory to familiar practice without losing his intended audience(s).

In “Corrective Feedback,” Rafoth acknowledges that error-free writing is no longer the only goal of teachers or tutors; nevertheless, he acknowledges what writing center tutors know all too well: Multilingual writers often strive for accuracy in grammar and in vocabulary. He writes:

Ignoring or contravening writers’ requests for feedback on their errors has opened writing centers to criticism for failing to take seriously multilingual writers’ requests for help with language and grammar, and for succumbing to the monolingual bias that treats errors the same way for native speakers, who can fall back on their intuitions about what sounds correct, and non-native speakers of English, who cannot. (p.110)

Rafoth explains how tutors can help writers both notice errors and correct them. He illustrates specific tutor moves, such as recasts, that assist with error correction through interaction.

The last chapter, “Preparing Ourselves and Our Tutors,” urges writing center directors to educate themselves and their tutors to interact productively with multilingual writers. Here, Rafoth is at his most hortatory: Directors have the responsibility for educating first themselves, then their tutors, then the faculty, then the university as a whole. Rafoth believes that multilingual writers, fortunately, “will drive many of these changes themselves. They will continue to ask tutors hard questions” (138).

A notable characteristic of the book is its interwoven narratives derived from the author's experience and interviews with "tutors, students, instructors, and directors at seven institutions in and outside the United States" (p. 3). Rafoth expertly incorporates these not as isolated anecdotes but rather as vivid evidence to support his claims. One example is a quote from an international programs officer at the University of Kansas: "As they increase international enrollments, [colleges] need to bolster the services surrounding them.... We can't be bringing students here to fail" (p. 22). Of even greater interest are the stories of multilingual tutors such as "Yadira" and multilingual writers such as "Patrick." One cannot come away from these lived realities without a strong sense of the value these individuals bring to the writing center context. As Rafoth stresses throughout the book, diversifying our staffs as well as our student writers benefits everyone.

Rafoth's book is a must-read for everyone involved in writing centers worldwide. While Rafoth's volume *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors* (2009), co-edited with Shanti Bruce, made an important contribution to the writing center community, the intentional international scope of *Multilingual Writers* invites a broad audience. Its reach reminds those of us in North America that hiring multilingual writing tutors and teaching our tutors responsible consulting practices for their interactions with multilingual writers is no longer a choice, but an imperative.

References

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About the Author

Terese Thonus has directed the Writing Center at the University of Kansas since 2007. She also teaches in the Department of English. Her research explores the intersections of oral interaction and writing, particularly in writing center contexts. Her work has appeared in *Assessing Writing*, *Discourse and Society*, *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *Linguistics and Education*, and *The Writing Center Journal*. With Rebecca Babcock, she authored *Researching the Writing Center: Towards an Evidence-Based Practice* (Peter Lang, 2012). Her current research examines speaking-writing relationships in second language acquisition theory and second language writing.