

RESPONDING TO ESL AND ELL WRITERS

Generally, instructors find non-native speakers' papers overwhelming because there are multiple issues that need to be addressed. It is sometimes difficult to determine whether the speaker is simply a weak writer, or too little time has been spent on the draft, and/or the kinds of mistakes stem from a lack of knowledge and experience of US academic writing standards.

I. Who are second-language writers? What are their strengths and needs?

[adapted in part from the CCCC statement]

Second-language writers are found in writing programs at all levels -- from basic writing and first-year composition to professional writing and writing across the curriculum -- as well as in writing centers.

Second-language writers include international visa students, refugees, and permanent residents as well as naturalized and native-born citizens of the United States and Canada. Many of them have grown up speaking languages other than English at home, in their communities, and in schools; others began to acquire English at a very young age and have used it alongside their native language. To many, English may be the third, fourth, or fifth language. Many second-language writers are highly literate in their first language, while others have never learned to write in their mother tongue. Some are even native speakers of languages without a written form.

Second-language writers -- who have come from a wide variety of linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds -- may have special needs because the nature and functions of discourse, audience, and persuasive appeals often differ across linguistic, cultural and educational contexts. Furthermore, most second-language writers are still in the process of acquiring syntactic and lexical competence -- a process that will take a lifetime. These differences are often a matter of degree, and not all second-language writers face the same set of difficulties. While some native speakers of English may face similar difficulties, those experienced by second-language writers are often more intense, and sometimes require different approaches and responses from the instructor.

Resist the tendency to lump second-language students together. Not only are your ESL students from different continents, countries, cities, and home environments, they're different students with different minds, unique bodies of knowledge, and varying degrees of English proficiency.

Try to take a strengths-based rather than a deficit-based approach to your work with these adults who are bringing wisdom and diverse experiences to your classroom.

II. Second-language-writer needs and strategies for response

1) Need for clear, culturally-sensitive assignments and ongoing direction and guidance

- Give written assignment sheets that detail expectations and guidelines, and outline strategies for success. Include grading criteria (see "3" below).
- Avoid colloquialisms and be explicit about any culturally-specific assumptions.

- Explain expectations for organization (remember that your second-language students may not be accustomed to a linear structure). Offer graphic organizational tools and sample papers or models (remind students to emulate form and conventions, not content).
- Detail expectations for source incorporation. Remind students that when they use others' words or ideas in their own writing, they must give each source credit according to the conventions of the field in which they are writing. Define plagiarism clearly and thoroughly in your syllabus; do not assume that all of your students will understand what it is.
- Check that students understand the assignment: have them "pair and compare" their understandings of the writing task and process, or informally quiz them on the assignment.
- Give specific suggestions for the writing process. For instance, encourage students to undertake two separate levels of revision: for the first, they should focus only on "larger-level" issues such as argument organization and support; after addressing these concerns, they should print out a new draft and focus only on sentence-level issues, such as grammar (a useful suggestion for second-language writers at this second stage is to read the paper aloud or have someone else read it aloud: it is generally much easier for these students to hear grammatical errors than it is for them to recognize such errors on the page).
- Assess readings for cultural implications; if a reading assumes too much mainstream or cultural knowledge, perhaps spend time with individual students explaining the text. If a reading is discussed in class, try to review what has been said at the end of the hour. Many ESL students cannot pick up the main ideas from a loose, discussion-based class.
- If an assignment or exam requires timed, in-class writing, some instructors offer ESL students more time; others assure students that they will be focusing on ideas and will mostly ignore grammar mistakes.

2) Need for additional support

- Talk often with your second-language students. And let your students do a lot of the talking, especially to make sure that they understand and have a good start on your writing assignment.
- Encourage your second-language students to seek out the Writing Center for additional help, and let them know what kinds of help they can expect at different stages of the writing process. Please have realistic expectations for how much and how quickly the Writing Center can help your second-language writers.

3) Need for some different response strategies

- For all students, learning-oriented assessment and effective communication about a grade begins with the assignment sheet and/or with the syllabus itself, where your evaluation criteria and the way you prioritize those criteria can be outlined and explained.
- Determine an approach to the grammatical and idiomatic errors made by second-language writers. The worst possibilities are to correct the draft completely for the student or totally ignore the

grammatical and idiomatic errors. Define a balanced approach. Here are some ideas that work for some instructors (this list was adapted from one by Sheryl Holt at the University of Minnesota):

--Distinguish and prioritize your evaluation criteria, isolating issues such as grammar and sentence structure and placing more weight on areas such as critical thought, thesis, and organization. Many teachers using this method will only grade down if aspects of grammar or sentence structure interfere with understanding of ideas. Minor problems such as subject-verb agreement, article usage, etc. are often viewed as a tolerable writing accent.

--Another method is to grade primarily on content, but to circle certain types of errors on the final draft and ask the student to correct and hand in a clean copy. For all students, clarify your expectations as to whether they can seek help "fixing" their drafts, and if so, from whom and to what extent.

--Some instructors prefer to have students hand in final drafts for a grade on the due date, which does not include any penalty for grammatical errors. But when the paper is handed back, the student must take the paper to the Writing Center and work with a tutor toward a reasonably improved draft (the tutor can help the student in a few major areas). The changed version then does not improve the grade, but is an additional requirement in order to receive the grade. In other words, an additional draft is required of all students with poor grammatical and mechanical skills, but these students have not been penalized for errors in these areas on the final draft (of course distinguish students struggling in these areas from those who have simply failed to proof-read and edit).

- Even more than most of their peers, second-language writers need prioritized, focused, explained, and instructive comments. Comment on grammar only after reviewing the organization and content of the paper so that you will avoid the trap of overcorrecting the grammar and ignoring ideas.
- Instead of just end comments, try to put more marginal comments at places of concern. Abbreviations and brief notes are less helpful to second-language writers, who often have not had years of American-style writing instruction and models and need more direction.
- Make most of your written comments about organization and ideas and perhaps only circle grammatical errors; if there are some consistent problem areas (other than article problems) then correct or provide a rule for that area.

Areas (other than grammar) of particular concern in second-language writers' papers:

- Gaps: sometimes for cultural reasons, non-native writers may have fewer written connections between ideas. Make your comments more specific than "not clear" or "gap"; provide direct comments like "you need more explanation here" or offer examples of connective words, phrases, and sentences.
- Logical development: because of cultural training, some internationals will have trouble narrowing a thesis sufficiently, asserting a thesis at the beginning of a paper, sticking to a thesis, or proving a thesis concretely enough for an American audience. Comments about logical development should help students understand audience expectations and should be stated clearly and directly (a question like, "Does this belong here?" is more confusing and less instructive than, "This claim would be clearer and would help clarify the paragraph if stated at the beginning of the paragraph.")