

Writing Matters

From assessment studies conducted by The University of Hawai'i Mānoa Writing Program

Second-Language Students' Writing Abilities

Students for whom English is a second or third language (ESL) have a keen understanding of how languages work. However, they have different skills and needs than native speakers of English. Because they have to deal with competing cultural expectations and competing languages, ESL students can have special difficulties seeing problems with their writing and solving them.

ESL speakers are often excellent students, highly motivated; their problems seldom involve a lack of ideas. Their primary writing problems typically involve difficulty expressing concepts and ideas in English. The solutions they attempt can sometimes be quite perplexing to their readers—including their professors.

This issue of *Writing Matters* addresses three questions from instructors of ESL students in writing-intensive (WI) classes. The suggestions we highlight come from experienced WI instructors and ESL experts at UHM.

“The writing hardly makes sense. Will grammar exercises help?”

ESL students have a wide range of language abilities that complement their learning. For many, English is one of several languages in which they communicate. Their multilingual background provides a rich landscape of cultural experiences as well as an “ear” for grammar and syntax, though never automatic “correctness.” Because ESL students have had extensive English grammar study (often with much more intensity than native English speakers), additional workbook drills won’t be effective. **It’s better to focus first on content and then approach grammar problems in the context of their writing.**

Often it’s difficult to distinguish content problems from grammar problems: content and language are so inextricably layered that we can be “tricked” into seeing only grammar errors.

Consider the excerpts below. In one, the student could handle the writing problems quite readily; in the other, problems require the student to do a considerable amount of rethinking and clarifying. In which excerpt do writing errors significantly and consistently interfere with understanding and thus reflect more than superficial problems? For which excerpt could you readily offer content feedback?

Excerpt A:

The overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy an interaction between United States and Hawaii political economy. The reciprocity treaty an incentives making the sugar industry to expand. And Hawaii sugar planters making an investment. The treaty change to Hawaii internal politics build the wealth of Caucasian owners in sugar plantations. The U.S. opportunism respect trade treaty caution the wealth if planters, therefore a critical role in overthrow in Hawaiian monarchy.

Excerpt B:

When interest rates expecting to fall, three reasons would cause to raise in stock prices. Firstly, the expansion in the economy causes corporation to have excellent earnings. Secondly, investors search for higher return to protect their wealth which are deposited in banks. Lastly, corporations would have opportunities to borrow at the lower interest rates for expansions.

Meaning seems far more difficult to determine in Excerpt A where missing parts of speech and a lack of connection between words and ideas result in a very perplexing paragraph. In Excerpt B, however, verb form errors and missing articles do not impede understanding; the paragraph provides three reasons for rising stock prices when interest rates fall.

When the writing interferes with understanding (Excerpt A)—

- Tell the student that the content is unclear or unfocused. Say “I can’t understand what you’ve written. Could you tell me what you are trying to say?”

Such garbled writing might suggest that the writer is overshooting her abilities to write academically and needs to use language appropriate to her level. Or, the student may not have understood the topic or concept, in which case some re-teaching may be necessary.

Once the student can explain what she is trying to say in each sentence, ask her to rewrite the draft.

You can also refer students to an ESL specialist in the English Department Writing Workshop. However, you, as the course expert, will be more qualified to assist the student with course content.

When the writing does not significantly interfere with understanding (Excerpt B)—

- Ask the student to find a native English speaker who can proofread the draft before the student

“What should I do if I don't have time to correct all their errors?”

Even though you may have good intentions, your correcting of errors doesn't promote learning. **In fact, focusing mostly on grammar errors, which seems easier to do than focusing on organization or logical development, conveys to students that correctness supercedes meaning.** However, if you want to help your ESL students fix grammar errors, here are helpful ways to respond to errors in drafts.

Ways to respond to grammar errors:

- Highlight one or two types of errors that seem to occur frequently in a student's paper. Explain the “correct” usage and give a few examples if you can.
- Often it's best to point out the problem and let the students do the fixing. If you correct the grammar, do so for only one paragraph so the students can see how to make corrections themselves.
- Ask students to keep a log of errors to consult in order to avoid recurring errors on the next assignment.

“How can I help students avoid plagiarism?”

Many ESL students come from cultural and educational systems where concepts of scholarship and individual ownership of ideas are very different from ours. Doing “critical analysis” involves “western” behaviors: we interrogate sources, make connections among them, and assert a stance. ESL students may have learned in their country that an established source is to be treated respectfully, not questioned or criticized by a neophyte. Sometimes students may be in such awe of the language in an original text or of an argument's powerful structure that they feel incapable of paraphrasing or summarizing. **Plagiarism or a student's abundant use of quotations may reflect a cultural tradition of respect for authority, not a lack of critical thinking ability.**

You can acknowledge your awareness of cultural differences regarding textual authority and help your students avoid plagiarism by providing explicit instruction on “doing critical analysis.”

Ways to encourage critical analysis and help students avoid plagiarizing:

- Discuss different cultural views on sources, texts, reference conventions, and plagiarism. Explain what is expected if students want to succeed in your course.
- Explain how and why you ask questions about texts; encourage students to see question posing as an important academic skill.
- When assigning course reading, require students to keep reading logs in which they summarize arguments, write about their thinking, make connections with other sources, describe difficulties with the reading, and ask questions.
- Explain when to quote, when to paraphrase, when to reference, and when to summarize using examples from your own writing or that of previous students. Then assign practice summarizing and paraphrasing in the context of your writing assignment. In addition, most popular handbooks give a thorough explanation of how to deal with documentation.

Capitalizing on strengths, improving language learning in context

By knowing a few strategies for helping ESL writers, instructors can teach more effectively. However, if you are still confronting problems after trying these suggestions, call a specialist in the ESL department (956-8610).

Students need frequent, guided practice using language—writing, speaking, listening—to develop as academic writers. As the course expert, you ultimately have the challenging task of helping your students learn specific written genres and conventions, a skill that no one in another department or a writing center can provide. By focusing primarily

on the content of student writing, you convey to students the importance of a well-designed, well-reasoned argument and of audience expectations. **By giving students opportunities to carry a piece of writing through a process that includes class discussion on a topic, critical analysis of sources, drafting, revising, getting feedback, and proofreading, you will assure better writing and better learning.**