

Vladimira Duka¹
Beograd

ESL STUDENTS IN WRITING CLASSROOMS

The research was done so as to disclose some of the recurring problems that teachers inevitably anticipate in the writing classroom, especially regarding the overall complexity of the ESL issue. My main research goal is to penetrate into the ESL matter to demonstrate the causes of misunderstanding between the teacher and ESL students in the writing classroom. Due to a variety of factors involved, I will argue that the whole set of learning conditions need to be taken into account while exploring the overall profile of a typical ESL student in the writing classrooms.

Key words: English as a second language, English language teaching, Composition classroom, culture, international students

The primary reason I decided to embark upon this complex and multifaceted topic is the fact that the field of the English as a Second Language has not been fully explored yet. Also, writing has been a neglected area of the English language teaching for some years. Maley emphasizes it is only recently that research into writing has offered thought-provoking ideas about what good writing implies (6). Until the 1980s, there was not much second language research to draw upon in building ESL pedagogy.

To illustrate the point, Matsuda furthers that a vast majority of American composition courses have been reported to be unprepared for second-language writers; it is explained that the English-only situation is assumed by default (637). It means that English-only situation practically leaves no room for the other speakers, but native-English ones. Valdes also responds to this problem claiming that the lack of attention to the presence of ESL students can be ascribed to the myth of language homogeneity (638). Conversely, every student should be treated on a case-by case basis without generalizations and unfounded assumptions.

One of the assumptions is that all students are native-English speakers despite the increasing influx of the international students recruited at American colleges. This knowledge speaks to the fact that the presence of ESL students should be addressed in the new light respecting all the linguistic varieties. Matsuda further suggests that all composition teachers consequently need to re-imagine the composition classroom as the multilingual space where the presence of language differences is the default (649). The increasing number of ESL

1 vanjaduka@gmail.com

students can also be a huge challenge for the teachers on how to handle the emerging dilemmas.

In addition, being a writing instructor, I have noticed a couple of dilemmas in the writing process. While collaborating with the other fellow instructors, there is a dilemma what the role of writing as a process, implies.

For this research question, equally important is the collegial relationship between the fellow teachers involved in teaching ESL students; it is because we use teachers' practices as the solid foundation to adequately treat and further develop ESL pedagogy. Adequate ESL pedagogy is pertinent to evade possible misunderstanding arising between the teacher and students to the greatest degree possible. Also, solid ESL pedagogy facilitates the teaching process as such.

Namely, ESL students are a diverse group of multilingual students who may have graduated from the educational system different from the American one. This difference may be one of the numerous reasons why ESL students as a specific group of heterogeneous students should be taken with necessary care and attention. Particularly, we need to take into account the indisputable facts that first-year Composition classes are no longer monolingual places whatsoever; there is a demographic shift that has included the ever increasing influx of international students on the American campuses. Thus, according to the Institute of International Education, as of 2004, over a half million international students were studying at American colleges and universities. Many still do continue to recruit internationally.

Due to the reasons on diversity given above, Composition teachers are beginning to reconsider pedagogical implications in order to fulfill the ultimate task: to train students to write connected, contextualized, and appropriate pieces of writing communication. As a result, second-language writers will become an integral part and parcel of writing programs.

Again, it transpires that the word "misunderstanding" is the crucial one in the paper. Being myself an ESL student both teaching and learning English, my writing experience so far shows that ESL students make fewer grammar mistakes in writing when their "mental apparatus" is somehow adapted to a certain degree to first language mental framework. This is particularly pertinent to the acquisition of lexical apparatus. The most important reason for immersing students to second language "mental apparatus" is their ability to learn the target language in the most natural and native-English way. Students are thus placed by in the relevant learning context. Regardless of what happens in practice, Zamel claims, some second language writers, like many language teachers, recommend thinking entirely in English (80). Indeed, the picture appears to be more complicated than simply encouraging or discouraging first language use in writing. While the use of first language seems to benefit some writers, it may give their writing a more foreign sound that should be avoided. Certainly, Walker and Tedick emphasize that recent research shows that it has been a traditional standpoint that the language development would happen naturally through extended exposure to second language while the real business of con-

tent learning occurred (16). As seen, there have been many conflicting views on the delicate issue mentioned

Despite that, ESL students' proficiency in first language can also be a resource not available to monolinguals. Leki explains that many writing protocols have shown ESL students switching to their first language as they plan to write in English (80). As it has been said, contrary to popular belief, Zamel concludes, thinking in first language should not necessarily be avoided while composing in second language (80). Both skilled and unskilled second language writers continue to use this technique to their advantage, even translating the target text from one language into another with positive results.

While the first language background is often a benefit rather than an impediment to the learning process to ESL students, Kroll shows that we should not presuppose "that the act of writing in one's first language is the same act as writing in one's second language" simply on grounds of different understanding and approach to writing skill tasks and the feedback to them (2). What it basically means is a different psychological view of the learners of first and second language. Kroll advocates for the teachers' understanding of all the facets of the complex field of writing because that knowledge can reflect how the factor of using a nonnative code affects second language performance (2). Lay claims that the amount of first language use depends in part on the topic students are addressing (81). ESL students seem to use first language about the events that are current during the period when they are actually functioning in first language because they can easily and personally refer to those events.

In short, Kramersch claims that one of the misconceptions that were dominant in foreign language teaching is that language is merely a code and, once mastered, by means of acquiring grammatical rules becomes automatically translatable into another (1). This notion, however, disregards the social and cultural aspect in foreign language pedagogy. Accordingly, this can cause misunderstanding and consequent cross-cultural miscommunication, which can be uncomfortable for both parties in the classroom.

In other words, teachers in composition classes need to be aware that the acquisition of writing skills in a foreign language is not an easy endeavor specifically because of the transfer between the two languages; it is the transfer of first language into the acquisition of second language, which can impede the learning process for an ESL student. Kroll further explains that the problem is compounded both by the difficulties inherent in learning a second language and by the way in which first language literacy skills may transfer to or detract from the acquisition of second language skills (2). Instead of stressing students' language differences, we should pinpoint their similarities.

In fact, what I claim to be significant to point out should be relevant knowledge blending rather than strict separation or conflict of first and second language knowledge wherever possible. Carson suggests that literacy skills can transfer across languages, but the pattern of transfer seems to vary depending on the language group (95). First language knowledge skills should serve as the base or can even support the development of second language knowledge skills; first language speakers have the linguistic competency and developed

mechanisms when required to gain second language. Again, this knowledge does not mean that language transfer should be neglected.

Even though much has already been learned about first language transfer in the development of second language skills, so much more lies undiscovered for future research. Further, teachers working with ESL students know little about the composing processes of students for who English may be a third or fourth language. When ESL students are present in writing classes, it is difficult to assess exactly what kind of language training they have undergone previously in their first language. Still, Leki points out that little research has been done if students are experienced in writing in their first language, and whether this could prove to be a complicating or alleviating element in their writing in second language (87). This knowledge would help the teachers recognize when students' problems arise from an attempt to apply previously learned writing techniques to new writing situations and contexts.

In addition, one more potential disadvantage which ESL students may have over their native-English counterparts relates to register, or degree of language formality. Teachers have probably noticed that many ESL students are more likely to use too high a register in spoken communication compared to their native-English counterparts. Leki explains this phenomenon drawing from the research that says that in first language development we learn informal spoken registers first and then the more formal written ones; thus, ESL students may give the false impression that they have already mastered everyday spoken forms and speak with formal elegance, while quite the opposite is true (29). Even proficient writers in first language have to acquire a wide language base from which to make meaningful choices; they may also find that confusing differences exist between the conventions of writing in their first and second language. As an illustration, the level of formality or patterns of presenting information in letters may differ.

Besides that, Leki further claims that native-English speakers have the same kind of writing problems as ESL students. She furthers her idea that the inability to write fluently in first language translates in second language. In order to improve their writing though, ESL writers do not need more work with the language itself, but rather with writing skills, techniques and functions; their lack of fluency in English does not appear to impede employment of effective writing strategies--at least not in fundamental way (78). Students' familiarity with formal registers may appear to work to their advantage when it comes to completing writing assignments. Still, at the same time, it can bewilder the teacher whether the message came across or not and thus cause misunderstanding in the classes. ESL students tend to produce complex, sometimes chaotic, redundantly long sentences in which the meaning is vague. For most of them, the idea of multiple drafts can be completely alien.

In such complex teaching environment, the teacher's role can be to raise cultural awareness. We will all learn that students exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors.

Nevertheless, Lay stresses that certain writing tasks, especially those related to culture topics do elicit more first language use when writing in second

language (43). Culture as an integral part and parcel of an ESL student profile cannot be disregarded by any means. Every student brings his own cultural identity and it can enrich the classroom environment especially, while interacting with native English students. New culture inevitably brings variety in the classroom; it can also serve as a learning tool to the native English students who may be stimulated to gain insight into the new culture, which they often find engaging.

Specifically, Lewis and Jungman advocate that each and every international student regardless of age, gender, social or religious affiliation is inevitably experiencing fairly predictable phases of the transition from one culture to another (44). Most of them go through the stressful process of culture shock, ranging from the initial euphoria to later frustration. Should they assimilate into the new culture or nurture their own cultural beliefs? The research results show that ESL learners who keep nurturing their own cultural belief are far more successful in acquiring second language skills for various reasons.

Truly, the results of the study conducted on positive cultural transfer by Friedlander show that the students tend to write better if they are writing in the same language in which their memories are stored (70). This finding has also important implications for teachers making writing assignments. If asked to write in English on topics which are stored in their memories in their first language, students will, *even if very familiar with the topic*, be at a disadvantage both in retrieving the appropriate information and in formulating their ideas on the paper (70). Research findings show to what degree students' native-language culture determines the scope of the topic assigned; also, we can decide whether culture in this way facilitates writing process to the student. The key finding is that learning is a cultural exchange, or a mutual process with no strict separation; instead of producing multilingual people, there is an ever-increasing need to produce bi and multicultural people in a globalizing world.

Indeed, as teachers, we all want our students to learn second language culture, but at the same time not shedding their own cultural identity. It is upon the teachers to be aware of the phases of cultural adjustment to understand that students' lethargy, passivity, pessimism or even irritability can be attributed to culture shock.

Again, culture creates and solves problems. This knowledge can serve as a guideline to the teacher to react accordingly and to undertake appropriate steps in teaching process. Kramsch further explains that culture in language learning is not the fifth language skill but serves as the background asset to the teacher in order to preclude the limitations and unsettlement in the classroom (1). Raising culture awareness contributes to a more productive understanding between the teacher and the students and does clear dilemmas to the teachers. This can facilitate the teaching process to the teachers when it comes to the treatment of some cultural biases and illogical and sometimes unreasonable claims like prejudice; prejudice towards differences can sometimes upset both the teacher and the students. In making writing assignments, it would seem to make sense to question ESL students about how familiar they are and how comfortable they feel with an assigned topic.

Although culturally conditioned learning sparks considerable controversy, its significance cannot be overlooked simply because of the undeniable fact that everyday language reflects cultural references. Culture is the code of communication. Scarcella elaborates on culture stating that sometimes confusion arises because, for some cultural groups, different gestures carry different meanings; for example, nodding the head, which indicates agreement or at least understanding to English speakers, may merely indicate that the listener is continuing to listen, while perhaps not understanding the content of what is being said (52). In particular, body language, gestures, intonation and language use can be ascribed to culture. Students are nearly always very aware of their cultural heritage and they refer to it readily. Keeping an open mind in responding to the differences in the content of their writing seems particularly important—sometimes, students’ assumptions about the world may be quite alien, even offensive to some unfamiliar. Thus, teachers can challenge their unexamined assumptions.

In conclusion, what does it mean for Composition, as a field, to become more aware of the classroom as a linguistically and culturally pluralistic place as described above?

Silva advocates that ESL writers need to be respected, understood, placed in suitable learning contexts and evaluated fairly (154). Inappropriate topics such as peace education, conflict resolution, political issues and religion should be avoided because of diverse population present in the classroom who may feel uncomfortable being asked publicly to discuss.

In fact, what should teachers teach then? Gordon and Pollard explain that much can be said about rhetorical, linguistic, conventional, and strategic issues, and about the distinct nature of writing in second language and its further implications (156). By trying to develop clarity of meaning, ESL students will craft logically coherent papers; coherent papers include a careful sentence structure and a careful choice of vocabulary. Students can also be triggered to write about the topics of their own choice. If properly and patiently guided through the writing process, ESL students’ papers will be well-crafted, persuasive, incredibly moving speaking of their lives in other worlds.

On the whole, in the paper, I have argued that differences between ESL and native English students can be overcome by way of the following factors: applying the appropriate teaching pedagogy, language transfers knowledge, trained teachers, full research, ethical treatment and understanding that ESL students are in a way different from their native-English counterparts.

In a nutshell, teachers should initially demonstrate to the students that they tolerate dynamism, difference, “otherness” and most importantly, *diversity* in all levels; a teacher’s proper stance can propel the students to behave in the same manner. I will draw on Kushner here to illustrate the point more clearly that says “I still believe in a dialectical ordering of universe in which there is a dynamic principle at work”.

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Владимира Дука

СТУДЕНТИ КОЈИМА ЈЕ ЕНГЛЕСКИ ЈЕЗИК ДРУГИ СТРАНИ ЈЕЗИК У УЧИОНИЦИ ЗА АКАДЕМСКО ПИСАЊЕ

Резиме

Истраживање има за циљ да разоткрије неке од насталих проблема са којима се наставници сусрећу на часовима академског писања, нарочито имајући у виду свеукупну комплексност истраживања енглеског као другог страног језика. Мој главни истраживачки циљ је да укажем на узроке нераумевања између наставника и ученика којима је енглески други страни језик. Због разних утицаја на услове за изучавање језика, мора се узети у обзир целокупни профил студента коме је енглески други страни језик.

Кључне речи: Енглески као други страни језик, изучавање енглеског језика, часови академског писања, култура, међународни студенти

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