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Familiar Strangers: International Students in the U.S. Composition Course

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Chapter 6

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Vignette

Many will recognize this sketch of new international undergraduates at a U.S. university:

Excited. Jet-lagged. Late to class because they got lost on a big campus. Overwhelmed by

myriad things to do on the first days of the semester. Confused by the English language that

sounds so different. Thrown into a first-year writing course instrumental to their academic

success.

Introduction and Overview of the Challenges

As Leki, Cumming, and Silva (2008) observe, undergraduate ESL writers in the U.S.

higher-education context have been a focal group for L2 writing researchers (pp. 28−36). In fact,

such groups of ESL writers have been researched from several perspectives, including,

- appropriate curricula options (Braine, 1996; Harklau, 1994; Matsuda, 2006; Silva, 1997;
  Williams, 1996) and pedagogical approaches (Horowitz, 1986; Johns, 1995; Spack, 1988;
  Zamel, 1982);

- ESL writing needs as perceived in an English Department versus other university
  departments (Janopoulos, 1992; Leki, 1995, 2003, 2007; Leki & Carson, 1994, 1997);

- L2 composing processes, rhetorical strategies, and textual characteristics (Ferris, 1994; Reid, 1993; Silva, 1993);

- ESL error treatment (Ferris, 1999; Truscott, 1999);

- teacher feedback (Ashwell, 2000; Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Ferris, 1995, 1997; Goldstein, 2005; Leki, 1992; Reid, 1994; Severino, 1993; Zamel, 1985);

- ESL student perceptions, experiences, preferences, and identities (Allaei & Connor, 1990; Christianson & Krahnke, 1986; Leki & Carson, 1994; Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Ortmeier-Hooper, 2008; Zamel, 1995; Zhu, 2001); and

- distinctions among traditional ESL writers, Generation 1.5 ESL writers, and basic, native English writers (Doolan & Miller, 2011; Harklau, Losey, and Siegal, 1999; Matsuda, Fruit, & Lamm, 2006; Roberge, Siegal, & Harklau, 2008).

Regardless, international ESL undergraduates proliferating at U.S. colleges remain familiar strangers (Milgram, 1974) passing through their respective campuses. Like strangers repeatedly encountered on the commuter rail, they constitute the most recognizable yet least known student population. Consequently, as Leki (2007) argues, international ESL students are often perceived as the "unidimensional and inferior Other" (p. 261). The "Other" tends to be considered as a homogeneous group of "traditional internationals" or intelligent learners of the English language who struggle to adapt linguistically and culturally (Lawrick, 2013, p.31).

Considering the amount of relevant research, one might wonder what accounts for this insufficient awareness. In L2 writing scholarship, the focus on international students in U.S. first-year composition courses peaked in the 1990s. (Please note the publication dates of most of the aforementioned studies.) Accordingly, the related findings are contextualized in the assumptions that are based on dated sociolinguistic realities of the 1990s. At that period of time,

a distinction between native and nonnative English-speaking countries was unambiguous: Students from nonnative English-speaking countries learned English as a foreign language. Nor did they study English composition or routinely write in English in their home countries.

Since the 1990s, however, two influential processes have drastically changed the sociolinguistic and educational landscapes in nonnative English-speaking countries. First off, globalization increasingly continues interconnecting nations through the English language, which has spread into virtually every country. Although the global presence of English is uneven, English is used by nonnative speakers for numerous purposes within diverse linguistic realizations that are much different from the Standard American English or British English (Blommaert, 2010; Schneider, 2011). The other catalyst is the internationalization of higher education, which has caused an English composition course to become an omnipresent requirement in worldwide, higher education contexts (Ide, 2010). To increase international mobility of students and faculty, universities across the globe align their curricula, credit allocation systems, and course offerings. This stimulates the introduction of writing-in-English curriculum at early, often elementary, stages of education in nonnative-English-speaking countries. Concurrently, U.S. universities are aggressively exploring new markets to combat their crumbling budgets. Global extensions of U.S. college campuses promote the writing-in-English curriculum molded in the U.S. tradition, which is further augmented by the global dominance of American English in academic collaboration and scholarly publications.

Put another way, teaching composition to international ESL undergraduates at U.S. colleges is based on assumptions that do not take into consideration the exposure to English that students experience in their home countries. Specifically, it is commonly assumed that international students are English-language learners who had limited experiences in the authentic

use of English, who had "little opportunity to write extended texts in English" (Ferris, 2009, p. 89) before taking their U.S. first-year composition course, and, therefore, who had acquired none-to-little knowledge of English composition and rhetoric. This leads to others' perceptions of the ESL student as a *tabula rasa*, thus supporting the premise that "proper" teaching of English writing begins in a U.S. college composition class. Yet it is hardly debatable that writing pedagogy should be founded on up-to-date and empirically supported insights into ESL students' previous experiences with both using and writing English.

This chapter presents selected findings from our study of a well-established ESL writing program at a U.S. university with a large population of international undergraduate students. The study was conducted in all 13 writing sections. The instruments included demographic data from university registrars; one instructor survey, administered at the end of the semester; and two student surveys, one administered at the beginning of the semester and one at the end. The instructor survey response rate was 100% (13 teachers); the student survey response rates were 82.5% (161 students) and 88% (171 students), respectively[1]. The reported findings inform five areas: an ESL course in the university's writing program, placement and student motivation, course structure and practices, instructor feedback, and writing lab (WL). A tripartite discussion of each area includes the observed processes, related findings, and potential implications.

Challenges, Implications, and Applications

ESL Writing Course

Observed practices. ENGL 106-I is a first-year writing course for nonnative-English-speaking undergraduate students at Purdue University. The course shares goals and learning outcomes with the non-ESL first-year writing course, fulfills the same requirement, and bears the same amount of credit, while providing additional support for ESL writers (Blackmon, Haynes,

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[1] In this paper, the quoted text is presented exactly as written by the students.

and Pinkert, 2012, pp. 9–12). ESL sections are capped at 15 students, scheduled for five times a week in a computer lab setting, and taught by teachers trained in L2 writing. This allows more frequent teacher-student conferencing, more available access to technology, and more prompt responses to student needs as they emerge in the course (see Silva in Chapter 5). This course setting, unfortunately, is barely representative of first-year writing programs at U.S. colleges. Rather, sections with 20 or more students meeting in a regular classroom and being taught by teachers lacking ESL training are more commonplace. Student learning in such an environment is further affected by the little knowledge that such teachers have about the English writing experiences that ESL students had accrued prior to their first-year writing course at a U.S. college. Our study provides germane insight.

Findings from student surveys. At the time of this study, 13 ESL writing sections were comprised of 195 students who came from 14 countries and spoke 18 native languages along with several additional, nonnative languages. The majority of the students came from Southeast Asia, with the majority of their countries of origin being China (46%), Malaysia (14%), India (12%), and South Korea (11%). Ninety-one percent of the students were international, and 9% were U.S. residents (a detailed student profile is available in Lawrick, 2013, pp. 36–38).

Prior to their U.S. writing course, 81% of students had studied English composition in their home countries. In fact, the majority of students in every national group had previously studied English writing (see Table 6.1 below).

Table 6.1

Students Who Studied English Composition in Their Home Countries by Nationality Groups

Nationality Group	% (n) of Students in the

	% (n)
	Nationality Group
Malay	100 (23)
Indonesian	100 (8)
Indian	90 (15)
Chinese	88 (143)
Arabic	86 (6)
Korean	71 (12)
Miscellaneous	82 (12)

Note. The Miscellaneous Group is comprised by 1-2 students of six nationalities, including Thai, Spanish, Russian, Kazakh, Turkish, and Croatian.

The following non-U.S. educational settings in which the students studied writing in English were reported:

- a writing course in school combined with a program preparing students for college admission examinations (54% of students);

- a writing course in school (19%);

- a program preparing students for college admission examinations (12%);

- a writing course in school combined with program preparing students for college admission examinations and individual tutoring (11%); and

- tutoring (4%).

In sum, 84% of the students studied English composition in non-U.S. secondary education settings, in which these writing courses lasted from one to 28 semesters (4, 8, and 12 semesters were indicated most frequently). In addition, 77% studied writing for standardized college admission tests, including TOEFL, SAT, ACT, TOEIC, GRE, IELTS, FCE, CAE, and TEPS[2].

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[2] The reported standardized examinations are as follows: the tests of the U.S. Educational Testing Services including TOEFL Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), American College

Implications. Our study provides evidence that international ESL undergraduates learn to compose in English in their home countries. Rather than being discarded, their previous backgrounds need to be studied and built upon. It is imperative that U.S.-based writing programs attune to worldwide realities by adjusting their writing pedagogies founded on insights from empirical studies. Although this is challenging due to the diversity of students' backgrounds, much-needed research pertains to (1) English writing curricula in national contexts that supply the largest groups of undergraduates and (2) international undergraduates in U.S. writing programs that are systematically conducted across U.S. institutions of higher learning and are similar to our study and the research by Andrade, Evans, and Hartshorne in this volume (see Chapters 1, 2, and 8).

ESL Placement

Observed processes. At Purdue University, matriculated international undergraduates enroll in courses through a guided self-registration system. That is, after meeting with an academic advisor, a student registers for courses through an online system. In this placement process, the decision regarding which writing course (ESL or non-ESL) to pursue is made by the student. Arguably, several factors may affect a student's choice, including the recommendation of an academic advisor, other international students, and the availability of ESL sections. While offering certain advantages, this ambiguous placement process opens several avenues to misplacement. Based on anecdotal evidence, academic advisors tend to place international students in non-ESL sections when ESL sections are full, although the course could be postponed until next semester. Also, a placement based on the advice of other ESL students can

Testing (ACT), Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), Graduate Record Examinations (GRE); the International English Language Testing System (IELTS); the tests of the U.K. Cambridge English Language Assessment including First Certificate in English (FCE), Certificate in Advanced English (CAE); the South Korean Test of English Proficiency (TEPS).

hardly be accurate. Finally, the sheer pressure of making an important decision is overwhelming for international undergraduates who are just beginning to figure out a U.S. college life.

Findings from student surveys. Our study investigated students' motivations to register for an ESL writing course regardless of the recommendations of their academic advisors. Forty-eight percent of students indicated that they would choose an ESL course over a non-ESL course, 31% would register for a non-ESL course, and 21% were not sure which track they would prefer.

To get deeper insight for this study, the students who indicated their preference for an ESL course were asked to briefly explain their reasons. The explanations were grouped in the four categories presented below. The parentheses show the percentage of students who displayed each respective motivation type; each category is illustrated by student comments.

- Intention to improve English writing skills (54%): "I want to improve my writing skills as much as possible." "It is a great class in effectively improve English writing." "I love to deal with my papers and essays. It is fun and I learn a lot from it."

- Awareness of the pragmatic value of writing proficiency in English for academic and professional success (34%): "It's useful for future classes/research papers." "Because English is a tool that I'll be using for the rest of my college career." "I will need to write in other courses. Useful in any job area."

- Perception of an ESL writing course as a fair learning environment as compared to that of a non-ESL course (9%): "Because I think it is fair to let all International Students take the same level of English. But if I take normal English course [sic] then [sic] I have to work harder since I will be competing [with students] whose native language is English."

- Other (3%): no comments provided.

One unsettling finding, though, is that some students were motivated by their perception of an ESL course as "easy credits," which reminds us of how delicate the balance between support and challenge can be.

Additional insight comes from two sets of thought-provoking comments volunteered by students who indicated a lack of motivation to take an ESL writing course. Firstly, transfer students from Malaysia and China had taken an English college writing course before: "I took a similar course in a home country university." Secondly, several students felt overwhelmed and struggled with their course load: "This semester my schedule is too challenging."

Implications. Our study suggests that international ESL students tend to perceive an ESL writing course positively for its practical benefits. This may not be typical of U.S.-resident ESL students, who may carry over the stigma associated with K–12 ESL. Regardless of their perceptions, ESL students should learn academic writing in the course that addresses their specific needs and provides adequate support so that they will succeed rather than set themselves up to fail in their college studies. Therefore, the development of accurate and fair placement processes is one of the most pressing issues that needs to be addressed.

ESL Course Structure and Practices

Observed processes. The Sequenced Writing Project (Leki, 1991) provides the framework for the four essays required in this course. The overarching goal is to introduce the foundations of research conduct and academic writing in a continuous, hands-on learning environment. At the beginning of the semester, students choose a topic to examine in a series of four sequenced essays: a personal narrative that addresses the chosen research topic, a literature review that provides practice in secondary research, an interview report that introduces students to original research, and an argumentative essay that builds on the three previous essays. The

assumption is that target skills and competencies will be reinforced at each essay phase, building up into the set of competencies that is expected of a college writer.

Instruction includes traditional face-to-face learning (e.g., mini-lectures, discussions and activities in class, small group, and individual work formats), peer review sessions, suggested sessions with writing lab tutors, and one-on-one student-teacher conferences. Additionally, as our study found, five out of the 13 instructors occasionally had group sessions, teaching half or one-third of the class at a time. To create a student-centered learning environment, face-to-face teaching is supplemented by e-instruction. At the time of our study, all teachers maintained either a course website or a course e-mail list to share handouts, lecture notes, assignment instructions, and other course materials.

The process of teaching essay writing is grounded in the assumption that academic writing proficiency develops best in the environment that engages a variety of instructional means and emphasizes collaboration between novice and experienced writers. To implement this assumption, the work on each essay begins with an introduction to the genre and guided essay planning in the setting of mini-lectures and classroom activities. After writing Draft 1, students meet with the instructor individually to discuss it, focusing on content, organization, and idea development. After that, the class meets for peer review and, if necessary, for a follow-up session to address any emerged concerns. Then students write Draft 2 and attend the second one-on-one conferences with the instructor to discuss Draft 2, this time shifting to concerns related to language usage, grammar, and mechanics. In both cases, the instructor provides oral feedback during the conference *and* written feedback either before or after the conference. As found from the instructor survey, 11 instructors used the Microsoft Word Commenting Feature and two made handwritten notes for written feedback. In addition, all instructors encouraged students to

work with a writing lab tutor. Finally, Draft 3 is submitted for grading, as a digital copy for 10 instructors, both digital and print copies for 2 instructors, and a print copy for 1 instructor.

       With some alterations, this organization of essay writing is typical of a U.S. college first-year writing course. However, it has yet to be empirically shown whether this course organization aids or hinders the academic success of international ESL freshmen who are unaccustomed with the U.S. traditions of teaching composition.

       Findings from student surveys. In our study, ESL students were asked to evaluate the educational practices that they experienced in the course as the least, somewhat, or most helpful in their learning to write for academic purposes. Table 6.2 below displays the results.

Table 6.2

Students' Perceptions regarding the Effect of Educational Practices Experienced in the ESL Course on Their Writing Proficiency

Practice	% (n) Least Helpful	% (n) Somewhat Helpful	% (n) Most Helpful
One-on-one conference with instructor	–	10 (17)	90 (154)
Combination of all instructional types	2 (3)	55 (94)	43 (74)
Classroom learning (incl. mini-lectures, class activities, and handouts)	9 (15)	56 (96)	35 (60)
Session with a writing lab tutor	13 (22)	51 (87)	36 (62)
Group work	31 (53)	62 (106)	7 (12)
Peer review	34 (58)	51 (87)	15 (26)

Note. Totals (N = 171). Percentages are rounded.

As shown, all students considered a one-on-one conference with the instructor as beneficial, with 90% of students perceiving it as their most beneficial learning experience. Another notable

finding is that learning from other ESL students (group work and peer review) had a high perceived value, almost equal to the perceived value of WL tutoring. Overall, the majority of students appreciated the combination of all educational practices experienced in the course.

Furthermore, the study investigated how the students felt about writing an essay in three drafts, a commonplace process in U.S. writing courses. Our finding indicates the preference for multiple drafts. In fact, only 8% (14) of the students would prefer writing just one draft as compared to 92% (157) who would prefer writing numerous drafts.

Implications. Our study suggests that, to be effective, an ESL writing course should provide numerous opportunities for active, hands-on learning. It should balance teacher instruction, peer-to-peer learning, and WL tutoring. It should also blend face-to-face teaching and e-learning, utilizing technology to create supportive learning environments. Importantly, the instructional design of the course should provide adequate time for one-on-one student-teacher interaction.

ESL Instructor Feedback

Observed processes. In the course, students receive both oral and written feedback from teachers on each of the two ungraded drafts. Oral feedback is provided during two one-on-one conferences and is combined with instructor's written comments on each draft. In our study, written comments were provided in the following forms:

- corrections on the draft or highlighted erroneous words/phrases with marginal explanatory comments (10 instructors);
- highlighted erroneous words/phrases with identification of an error type (9);
- highlighted erroneous words/phrases (5);
- a combination of marginal comments and end comments (2); and

- end comments (2).

Notably, 12 instructors shared the assumption that the form of written comments should vary depending on the draft and the student's progress, whereas 1 instructor believed that the same form should be used consistently throughout the course.

      Findings from student surveys. As discussed in the previous section, the students perceived the oral feedback that they received during one-on-one conferences as the most helpful type of assistance in their essay-crafting process. Similarly, 13 instructors unanimously considered the conference as the most effective type of teaching. Because oral feedback is provided in combination with written comments, our study investigated which form of the written comments listed above that the students considered as the most helpful for revising drafts. To accommodate those who would object to written comments, an "Other" comment box was included for an open-ended answer. Table 6.3 illustrates the students' perceptions.

Table 6.3

Students' Perceptions regarding the Form of Written Instructor Comments Most Helpful for Draft Revision

Form	% (n) of Students
Corrections on the draft provided with explanatory marginal comments	65 (111)
Combination of marginal and end comments	62 (106)
Highlighted erroneous words or phrases	58 (99)
Highlighted erroneous words/phrases with identification of error type	49 (84)
End comments	38 (65)
Other: oral feedback	2 (34)

Note. Totals (N = 171). This survey item is a multiple-choice question.

These results clearly suggest the students' preference for written comments. Most notably, the students perceived detailed feedback, as opposed to a paragraph summarizing errors and suggesting revisions, to be more instrumental in their learning to write a college essay. Notice that many students indicated almost equal preference for four different forms of written comments, which is in line with the instructors' shared belief that the form of comments should vary to adjust for emerging skills in revising and editing.

Implications. Our findings clearly suggest that the learning benefits of combining oral feedback with written comments are significant. To implement this effectively, three issues need to be addressed, however. Firstly, it is instrumental to ensure sufficient time for systematic oral feedback, scheduling student-teacher conferences during regular class time rather than office hours. Secondly, students need to become active collaborators in the essay-crafting process as opposed to playing the regrettably typical role of passive receivers of teachers' comments. Thirdly, this process should connect all involved parties: the student, the teacher, and the WL tutor. One effective sequence may be as follows: A student receives written comments before the conference, processes them, and makes some revisions. At the conference, this student asks questions and the instructor teaches mini-lessons targeting prime concerns or emerged error patterns. The student works on these concerns with the WL tutor.

Writing Lab

Observed processes. It is not unusual among writing teachers to consider the WL as the key resource for ESL writers. In the examined ESL Writing Program, all instructors encouraged students to utilize this institutional support resource, but only four indicated that their students *regularly* visited the WL throughout the semester. At the university, the WL serves both non-ESL and ESL students. At the time of our study, the ESL angle was at the onset of development.

Along with professional staff, the lab is staffed with graduate and (some) undergraduate tutors. Students can have a 30-minute-long session once a week. At the end of a session, the tutor asks whether the student would like the instructor to receive a brief note about the session. If the student agrees, a note is put in the instructor's mailbox. As argued by David and Moussu in Chapter 4 of this volume, it is imperative for writing programs to figure out how to assist ESL writers effectively. Our findings provide relevant insight.

Findings from student surveys. To address the concern that an accurate answer may be difficult to obtain, our survey did not inquire whether students visited the WL. Instead, we examined the students' perceptions regarding their experiences in the WL.

Sixty-nine percent (118) of students felt that WL tutoring was beneficial compared to 31% (53) who did not feel this way. The students mentioned mostly working on grammar, spelling, sentence structure, mechanics, and language usage, but several students also mentioned brainstorming, planning, and essay organization.

When asked what kind of help they would like to receive in the WL, the students named both Higher-Order Concerns (HOCs), such as brainstorming, planning, and organization, and Lower-Order Concerns (LOCs), such as transitions, grammar, punctuation, and other aspects of English language usage. Some student comments are as follows:

- HOCs-related comments: "Inspiration (help me figure out) or the main point for the essay"; "the way to write interesting introduction and how to well organize the essay"; "idea problems"; "paper structure"; "suggestion[s] about organization and structure"; "help in building up strong support"; and

- LOCs-related comments: "grammar and more on sentence structure (with explanation which they usually can't provide)"; "i want my essay more clear"; "the way of editing in

American writing style"; "grammar error, word choice, [sentence] structure"; "more native way to write sentences"; "grammar, transitions between paragraph and check errors".

In addition, three requests emerged. The first was to extend the session time or to allow several sessions per week: "More time. I think 30 mins for each time is fine. But, I had hard time because of the limitation of weekly uses. Once a week was uncomfortable [insufficient] for me." The second request voiced students' discontent with the "non-interference" philosophy of writing centers that disapproves of error correction and explicit suggestions. In fact, several students expressed the need for more direct guidance:

- "I hope that the tutors *would not be afraid of giving more suggestions* in improving our essays. As personally I can see, some tutors do not dare to point out the whole picture to a student when it comes to improving the student's writing skills. It might be that the tutor does not want to make the student feel offended" (emphasis added);

- "I would like them to *direct me in the way I want to write my essay*. They should also provide their own ideas regarding how to write the essay" (emphasis added); and

- "More time and more detailed correction check."

Finally, students asked for a tighter collaboration between instructors and WL tutors: "I'd like the writing lab tutor to emulate the help provided by my instructor. Well to be more specific to emulate the format my instructor helps me in."

Implications. Our findings suggest that ESL students are underserved in writing centers, which tend to prioritize errors related to LOCs. Put another way, WLs provide an emergency response to ESL writers in an inadequate time frame. To assist ESL writers more effectively, the pedagogy and practices of WLs need to change, as discussed in detail by David and Moussu in

Chapter 4 of this volume. WLs need to become the place where ESL writers *systematically* work on *all* aspects of essay crafting, learning to write through collaboration with writing professionals. Such learning partnerships would help students assume the ownership of essay planning and the revision process, thus molding them into skilled academic writers.

Summary

- Most students studied English composition in pre-higher education settings in their home countries. Most frequently, non-U.S.-based English composition was taught at school and in a program to prepare students for college admission examinations.

- Half of the students opted for an ESL writing course. Most were motivated by practical benefits of English writing proficiency for college studies and professional careers. Others thought that an ESL course levels the playing field with native English speakers.

- A one-on-one student-teacher conference was perceived as the most helpful learning experience.

- A guided essay revision process, combining oral feedback and detailed written comments, was preferred.

- Students indicated that WL tutoring should be more extended, more explicit, and better aligned with the ESL writing course.

Discussion Questions

1. Based on your experience, which instructional practices (traditional face-to-face teaching, one-on-one teacher-student conferences, group work, peer reviews, or WL tutoring) are most effective for L2 writers?

2. In this study, the students perceived a one-on-one conference as vital for effective learning to write in academic English. Can you think of other reasons why students might prefer a one-on-one conference to other instructional practices?

3. Should student self-assessment of learning outcomes inform curriculum decisions in an ESL writing program? If so, to what extent?

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