

Remembering the English Language Learning Trajectory of L2 Students in ENG 101

A Response to: John Beaumont's (Vol. 2, No. 1, 2015) "ENG 101 Instructors' Perspectives on the ESL Experience"

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Before my appointment at John Jay College, I taught writing for six years at Shenandoah University, a small school in rural Virginia. Because I was the only ESL instructor on campus, I worked with first-year freshmen all the way up to those in graduate school. This gave me a unique perspective on how L2 students gain in English language skill over a period of years as they push higher in their education. Once I experienced this ESL trajectory first hand, I was able to relax more in my freshman composition courses, knowing that over time and with hard work, L2 students would develop the skills they needed to be successful in English.

In my first semester of teaching an ENG 101 course for L2 students here in New York, I met Seonae, a freshman who had recently emigrated from Korea. Although Seonae had barely passed the CUNY writing proficiency test, she was eager to learn and worked hard on her first essay.

Most L2 learners start college in this way—nervous but also expectant that their writing instructors will guide them to English language success. But, as John Beaumont notes in his article, "ENG 101 Instructors' Perspectives on the ESL Experience," in the January 2015 issue of the *NYS TESOL Journal* (Vol. 2, No. 1, pp. 89–97), many composition faculty have little training in understanding the needs of ESL students and so don't know how to help them. Beaumont reports that surveyed instructors felt "underprepared to teach these students and sought further opportunities for training." Yet, faculty development in ESL and other types of support are not always accessible to writing instructors, causing frustration to both teachers and students. Beaumont rightly calls for action to change this. In the meantime, by simply being reminded of L2 learners' trajectories, perhaps our frustrations and the anxieties of our ESL students can be eased a little.

Early on in my ENG 101 course I assign a creative nonfiction personal narrative. I find that L2 students are able to relax somewhat about their language learning when they write about themselves. This wasn't the case for Seonae, however. Once in class I caught her crying as she tried to write her story. I was concerned, so I asked her to meet with me during my office hours to talk about why she was upset. I had thought her tears were because she was writing about some kind of sad or difficult moment in her life, but, mostly, she told me, she was frustrated because she couldn't communicate in English at nearly the same level she had attained as a writer of Korean. "In Korea," she told me, "I won prizes for my creative writing. But in English, all my words sound like baby's."

This story illustrates one of the points that Beaumont made in his article. Although ENG 101 teachers recognize they have ESL students in their classrooms, these teachers do not always understand that there are different kinds of L2 writers. When we as instructors encounter student errors or read presentations of language that are different from our expectations of standard academic English, we sometimes assume that L2 students cannot write well in their first language either. We often fail to see that some of the anxiety our L2 students feel is their inadequacy with their written English, which directly conflicts with their confidence in their native language.

In my office that day I tried to offer Seonae hope. I told her that while she could not yet see her own trajectory as a student of English, I could. As Beaumont's article noted, it takes four to seven years for students to gain English proficiency when compared to native speakers (Collier, 1989). I explained this to Seonae, but I also predicted that she would be a student who would learn English quickly, because according to a study by Cummins (1978), academic training in a native language correlates directly to time-to-proficiency in English.

Although I wish I could report that Seonae did not cry out of frustration again in my class—I *can* say that her anxiety grew less as her skills in English increased. And last semester, two years after she completed my ENG 101 course, Seonae won a college-wide creative writing competition, prompting her to come to me proudly and say, “Now I can write well in two languages.”

Trajectory in English learning is something we all need to remain aware of as we instruct the diverse L2 students in our classrooms. We need to remind ourselves that ENG 101 is only the first of many courses these students will take on their academic journey. While we cannot teach them all the rigors of English in one semester, understanding our students’ varying trajectories can help us be more sensitive to their needs in the moment, ease some frustrations in both our teaching and in their learning, and help us envision their future success.

References

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- Cummins, J. (1978). Educational implications of the mother-tongue maintenance in minority language groups. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 34, 395–416.



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