Toward a Holistic Approach to Supporting English Learners in Universities

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

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Beaumont (2015) analyzes a seminar for community college writing instructors that investigated the challenges the instructors had in addressing the needs of their ESL learners. Only one of the seminar participants had experience teaching ESL students or taking courses in TESOL pedagogy, and the seminar provided the instructors with a necessary space to ask questions about ESL learning and to learn about the varied needs and linguistic backgrounds of their students. The seminar appears to be part of a movement in TESOL and writing studies to move the focus of ESL support programs and services from what Matsuda (2006) calls "a policy of linguistic containment" (p. 641), in which all ESL-related issues should be addressed and corrected in remedial English courses, toward a more holistic approach, in which all instructors at a university are prepared to address the needs of ESL students. Kanno and Varghese (2010) note that in the K–12 context this idea has become commonplace, but they argue that in higher education "the notion that every teacher is a language teacher remains a foreign idea" (p. 331). Beaumont (2015), along with recent work such as Hafernick and Wiant (2012), Jordan (2012), and others, illustrates, however, that perhaps this holistic approach to supporting our students is becoming less "foreign" at universities. As I often tell teacher education students and composition teachers at Hunter College, where I coordinate the ESL courses, "We all should have MA-TESOL degrees now."

Hunter College is a four-year university, part of the City University of New York (CUNY) system, that has courses and instructors with similar concerns as Beaumont's seminar participants. We have tried one-off, two-hour workshops about ESL student needs that were open to the entire faculty, and we have created materials and resources for instructors similar to the very useful materials provided on the John Jay College of Criminal Justice E-Resource Center website (http://jjc.jjay.cuny.edu/erc/index.php). These attempts at faculty outreach are in addition to our work to increase the number of students who enroll in our summer and winter ESL immersion programs and who sign up from the ESL sections of our two required composition courses. In all of this work, however, I am often confronted with the same questions that frustrated Beaumont's seminar instructors: (a) who are the ESL students?, and (b) how do we identify them and support them once they are in general education courses?

At Hunter College, we have witnessed a huge decrease in the number of students officially labeled as "ESL-non proficient" and required to take one or more ESL courses; however, similar to other CUNY schools, over 60% of our student population speak a language other than English at home, and each semester many students are referred to me for ESL help by instructors who feel ill prepared to address their particular linguistic needs in their courses. In my three years in the CUNY system, I feel that I spend as much time trying to identify and reach out to students that would benefit from our ESL programs as I do creating programs and policies that would best support ESL students, such as the seminar described in the article. Jordan (2012) argues that I and Beaumont's seminar instructors should not really be surprised that we struggle so much to support ESL students, as the field does not have a consistent and clear definition about who is an ELL, ESL, or ENL (English as a new language) learner—which, he notes, leads to "a practical uncertainty about who ESL students are, where they are, and how they may best be educated in US contexts" (p. 4).

At the university level, the responses to this uncertain situation for ESL programs and services are, of course, complex, but the comments and experiences of the instructors in Beaumont (2015) point us in at least two directions. First, we must continue to create seminars, professional development opportunities, and campus-wide dialogue that addresses who our students are, what are their linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and how should we adapt our teaching to embrace and draw on this diversity. Seminar participants appear to have gained a great deal of understanding about their students and benefited from the opportunity to dialogue with TESOL experts and, more important, with each other. At the end of his article, Beaumont mentions further activities at the college, including a four-semester Teaching Academy for new instructors that will address the complexities inherent in teaching "the diverse community college study body" (p. 95). I can only hope that more and more administrators will support these activities and begin to see language teaching and support for ESL-background students as a campus-wide issue on college campuses.

Second, and just as important as creating seminar opportunities, it is clear that we must continue to move away from the "deficit" and "containment" model of ESL, which views language issues as something easily "corrected" and not part of a student's educational and linguistic identity. In this way, we should perhaps not fixate on definitional questions of who is or is not ESL, but instead move toward a pedagogy that is based on the translingual practices and multilingual lives of students (Canagarajah, 2013). In addition to the comprehensive curriculum for K–12 educators offered by the CUNY-NYS Initiative on Emergent Bilinguals (Celic & Seltzer, 2011), some recent work at the university level has described writing assignments in which students investigate the linguistic landscapes and language use of their homes and communities (Jordan, 2012; Smitherman & Alim, 2014).

It is an open question of how far can we expect composition teachers to incorporate issues of multilingualism and translingualism into their syllabuses, classroom activities, and assignments; as Beaumont (2015) has illustrated, perhaps awareness and discussion of linguistic differences is a sufficient first and vital step for many composition instructors. At the same time, why not move to the next step and do more at the university level to make our classrooms into the translingual spaces that students already live in?

Taking all this into account, the article and the seminar participants reinforce an important point that K–12 educators know well: At the university level, we simply cannot continue to expect ESL issues to be addressed in only ESL courses before students enter the "mainstream," just as we cannot continue to expect our courses to consist of monolingual students from homogenous backgrounds. I am optimistic that more and more college instructors are aware of the diversities their students bring to classroom discussions and writing assignments; I am not confident, however, that there is an acceptance or true understanding of what this diversity means in terms of changing our teaching practices, writing assignments, and general expectations regarding the languages used and the "standard" Englishes taught. In many ways, the seminar described in Beaumont (2015) is an extension of the decades-old call from Shaughnessy (1976) for composition teachers to "remediate" themselves and become "a student of new disciplines and of [the] students themselves in order to perceive both their difficulties and their incipient excellence" (p. 238). I hope that other schools follow the example set by Beaumont (2015) and create similar seminars and programs that can involve many stakeholders from across the campus in examining how to create assignments and classroom activities that address instructor concerns but are also in tune with the competencies and needs of a multilingual student body. In this way, seminars such as these will encourage and hasten the vital transformation of our universities and classrooms into places where multilingualism is the norm and goal of education, not a problem in need of a solution.

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