ENG 101 INSTRUCTORS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE ESL EXPERIENCE

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English as second language (ESL) students' language and literacy development does not end with the completion of ESL courses. Developmental needs continue as students move on to gatekeeper college courses, such as college composition (ENG 101). The articulation from ESL to ENG 101, however, is not always clearly defined. Moreover, instructors on both sides of this divide have surprisingly different professional training, course objectives, and awareness of ESL students' identities, skills, and needs. Such lack of continuity or understanding can negatively affect student achievement. This paper reports on an ongoing series of professional development seminars and related research on how community college instructors perceive their ESL students and English as a mode of academic communication, and how these perceptions may affect instruction and learning. The results highlight how conversations across ESL and English programs can benefit both students and instructors in meaningful ways.

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One of the defining issues in postsecondary education today is college readiness and preparing students for the rigorous expectations of college courses. The problem is acutely evident for a growing number of college students who must first complete remedial courses before they begin their core college coursework. Roska, Jenkins, Jaggars, Zeidenberg, and Cho (2009) report that 60% of first-year community college students are placed into at least one remedial course. One of the largest segments of the remedial population is students designated as English language learners and placed in English as a second language (ESL) courses.

For any remedial student, but particularly for ESL students, adjusting to any number of potentially new social, economic, cultural, and linguistic challenges, enrolling in college does not ensure successful completion of a degree. In fact, research shows that just two-thirds of remedial-designated students who are enrolled in two-year colleges complete remediation requirements within a two-year period, and that only a third of these students go on to complete gatekeeper courses such as college composition, prerequisites to students' major coursework (Jaggars & Hodara, 2013). In a large study of Virginia community college students, Roska et al. (2009) reported that less than 50% of students who had taken remedial requirements completed first-year English composition. Among those who took gatekeeper courses, roughly 75% passed them. In other words, ESL students are struggling to pass their remedial requirements, and, even if they do pass, they are not making a successful transition to their post-remedial coursework.

A significant amount of research has looked at the relative success of remedial students in general (Bailey, Jeong, & Cho, 2010; Boatman, 2012; Crook et al., 2011; Edgecombe, 2011) as well as new models or programs to support students with remedial requirements (Cho, Kopko, Jenkins, & Jaggars, 2012; Edgecombe, 2011; Hodara, 2012). What has been less examined is specifically what happens to ESL

students when they test out of ESL classes and enter credit-bearing courses. Most often, these students are mixed in with native English speakers in introductory courses taught by faculty who are experts in their respective fields but lack training and institutional support for working with English language learners. Underlying this process is the belief that ESL students are no longer English language learners once they place out of ESL remediation. This assumption, however, is faulty given that research estimates that it takes from four to seven years to develop academic proficiency in English (Collier, 1987, 1989; Hakuta, Goto Butler, & Witt, 2000). While there may be some indication of how these students are faring overall, we have little evidence to explain why their success rates are so low. Furthermore, we know even less about how instructors of gatekeeper courses understand the linguistic and educational needs of these students or how prepared instructors are to meet these challenges.

In one report, Anderson (2013) looked at how recent MA Composition graduates teaching in community colleges assessed their own preparedness to instruct this population. They reported that they had expected the diversity of the community college population and were open to working with these students. Once in the classroom, however, they were struck by the reality of the students' needs, particularly in terms of their English language skills. Overall, these instructors felt underprepared to teaching these students and sought further opportunities for training. In a similar, more extensive investigation, Matsuda, Saenkhum, & Accardi (2013) conducted a perception survey to determine whether composition instructors were aware of the L2 writers in their classes and of their needs. The findings revealed that the instructors were indeed aware of the L2 writers and their needs and that many were eager to work with these students. The findings also showed, however, that many of these instructors were not taking steps to meet the needs of the population. Some constraints in this regard were identified: college policies, a lack of shared teaching and assessment materials, and a lack of professional development opportunities to work with this population.

Largely exploratory in nature, this paper seeks to directly complement recent discussions. As part of ongoing professional development and inquiry to improve success rates at the college, it explores the views and experiences of English composition instructors who have English language learners in their classes. It reports on the outcomes of practitioner-driven professional development—that is, the English Department of the institution being described expressed a need for professional training with regard to working with the ESL population in their ENG 101 courses. The results of this exploration suggest that, despite teachers' strong desire to serve their students, there is a dearth of understanding regarding who their ESL students are and how pedagogical decisions may benefit or impede their students' progress.

The goals of this inquiry are to identify what instructors see as the challenges of teaching ESL students and to look at how their discourse about these students might affect their teaching. Ultimately, the longer term goal of this inquiry is for the insights gained from discussions with instructors to drive professional practice, training, and policy at the college with regard to ESL and Generation 1.5 populations. In addition, this report will serve as a springboard for more formal inquiry into these issues. While the setting is about instructors of ENG 101, many of the ideas shared in this exploration may be true of other courses that require writing and spoken English.

Background

Setting and Participants

This paper examines a grant-funded elective seminar that took place at a large urban open-enrollment community college. The seminar met for three two-hour sessions in one academic semester. The participants included 13 English Department faculty members, 10 of whom were part-time adjunct instructors, teaching between one and three courses that semester. All of the instructors taught or had taught ENG 101 at this institution, and all had enrolled in the seminar because they wanted to learn about working with the ESL students in their classes. The majority of these instructors, particularly the adjuncts, self-identified as poets, writers, actors, or simply teachers of college English; only one participant had

taken a courses in pedagogy. That individual had had formal training in teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). Two others reported having had pedagogical training in the form of a writing across the curriculum (WAC) seminar, but not specifically in TESOL methodologies. The seminar was led by one full-time ESL instructor with experience in TESOL teacher education and by the English Department faculty coordinator of the composition courses. Also involved were two ESL/Linguistics faculty members to review issues of second language acquisition and language variation.

Data

Data for this report came from two primary sources: the instructors' seminar applications and their final reflective papers. Notes from seminar events and discussions complemented the ideas shared in the initial applications and final reflections.

The seminar application asked the instructors to consider two questions:

1. What challenges do you encounter in helping ESL students succeed in ENG 101?
2. What questions about ESL learners and/or instruction would you like addressed?

Participants' responses varied greatly in terms of length and approach to the task. While some responded to each question in turn and in some detail, most combined both questions into a single, essay-like response. To isolate common themes or patterns, the seminar leader (ESL) and one of the linguistics consultants independently reviewed and coded the responses. The two lists were then discussed and a final list of eight areas or concerns was formed. Because of the open nature of the questions, no attempt was made to quantify these responses. The one area, discussed below, that all applicants commented on was grammar. Another very common concern, expressed by all respondents in one form or another, was the questions of appropriate teaching methods. The purpose of creating such a list, however, was to guide or prioritize concepts for the seminar curriculum and not to isolate discrete categories or concerns for examination. In fact, there is clear overlap among the eight issues. An overview of these concerns is presented in Table 3, and more specific references are included throughout this report.

The final reflective paper asked participants to consider how the seminar had influenced their thinking about teaching and learning in ENG 101, particularly with regard to ESL students. These reflections were also reviewed for underlying themes or patterns by the same two individuals. Again, because the assignment was open-ended and primarily intended for reflection, more formal analysis was not conducted. These themes and their implications are discussed in the rest of this paper.

Factors Influencing Student Progress

Examination of the participants' written responses and intervening discussions reveal two critical underlying themes that play a role in the ways these community college instructors approach working with ESL students. These themes are given here as questions: Who are the "ESL students"? and What is "English"?

Who Are the "ESL" Students?

One of the biggest challenges these instructors faced was grappling with the diversity among their English language learners. As noted in Anderson (2013) and Matsuda et al. (2013), the instructors in this seminar had welcomed the idea of teaching such a diverse population, but the reality was somewhat overwhelming. At the beginning of the seminar, most of the instructors seemed to share the sentiments of one participant who commented, "I would like to know how best to serve the two different groups who are present in my ENG 101 class," referring to the native and non-native users of English. As they continued this discussion, however, they began to describe these students in a variety of ways: as

Table 1 *Concerns of ENG 101 Instructors Working with ESL Students*

1. Affect
   - How do I help students manage their feelings of fear, stigma, or intimidation regarding writing in English?
   - How do I manage my own feelings of inadequacy, frustration, and anger regarding teaching this population?

2. Methods
   - What teaching methods best serve the needs of ESL students?

3. Grammar
   - What grammar should I teach?
   - How do I teach grammar to students when I don't know it myself?
   - How does students' first language influence their English?

4. Cultural references and vocabulary
   - What do I do when ESL students don't understand the cultural references and vocabulary in course materials?

5. Participation
   - How can I get ESL students to participate more actively in class and small-group discussions?

6. Standards
   - Should I have different grading standards for ESL students?
   - Should I give them any special treatment or consideration?

7. Feedback
   - What kinds of feedback should I give my ESL students on their writing?
   - How do I help them develop or express their ideas in writing?

8. Support
   - How much time outside class should I spend helping ESL students?
   - How can they develop their English language skills outside of class?

international students still acclimating to the language and the culture of the United States; as recent immigrants who had been in the United States for a few years and had had some schooling here; and as individuals who were proficient in English but had a second, more dominant language they used at home or outside of class. Instructors categorized all of these students as "ESL" even though admittedly they were not always certain who on their class rosters fit into which category.

In contrast, ESL instructors at this college are acutely aware of the heterogeneity of the students in ESL courses. In an ESL class of 25, there might be two or three who are international students studying on F1 visas. The vast majority of their classmates, however, are U.S. residents, who had been in the country for a few months, a few years, or, more commonly, longer, demonstrating a wide range of language and literacy skills. Known as Generation 1.5—loosely defined as students who immigrated to the United States as children or teens and, as residents, received much of their schooling here (Reid, 1997, 1998; Roberge, 2009), these students learned English largely "by ear," and therefore are often characterized by native-like aural/oral proficiency in English but with limited literacy and/or proficiency in academic English.

By conflating these groups of students into one umbrella category, these instructors were less able to differentiate between the various students' needs and competencies. In the context of this discussion together, the participants began to see that their perspective on who their ESL students were was inaccurate or insufficient.

What Is "English"?

Just as the instructors had developed a limited view of who their ESL students were, they also held restricted notions of what English was and how it was used by college students. One instructor cited the adage "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" to underscore a deep frustration, even anger, that she and other instructors shared regarding the students' persistence in using non-standard English forms. Some had attributed this to "resistance," others to "intimidation" or "fear" of making errors. This comment opened a discussion regarding the common sources of language errors: interference from a student's L1, the language environment, and personal or cultural factors.

Interference from L1. From the outset, the instructors were eager to know the sources of errors and how best to help students use standard formal English. Specifically, participants were interested in learning the typical transfer errors from various languages to English. Examples of common errors were presented and discussed (e.g., the omission of articles by Chinese speakers). It was noted, however, that no seminar could adequately prepare instructors for the wide array of errors they might encounter, and that, while interesting, these examples represented just the tip of the iceberg of errors that ESL or language minority students might make in English. Understanding L1 interference and its effect on L2 speaking and writing was another pivotal moment for the instructors, because they recognized that they did not necessarily need to become grammar teachers per se. This had been the greatest concern of these instructors, as it had been for the instructors interviewed by Anderson (2013). They did, however, learn through this interaction that they could develop a heightened awareness of common errors for instructional focus.

Language environment. This seminar also opened participants' eyes to other sources of non-standard English use. Just as students' L1 may influence their use of English, so may the language environments in which they live, including home, work, the media, and other social contexts. Many language minority students may have very little direct contact with users of formal or "standard" English outside of college. In fact, the English produced by students, seen as "non-standard" by an instructor, may possibly be the English that students hear and use on a daily basis outside the classroom without any negative feedback whatsoever. Our students tell us this themselves. Furthermore, other varieties of English, such as African American Vernacular English, may often be reinforced by their peers and communities (Matarese & Anson, 2010). In other words, language variation may not result from their lack of language training or from first-language transfer but from their exposure to spoken English in their daily lives (Shafer, 2009).

Through this discussion, the instructors became aware that some errors and variations may not be a matter of language transfer but rather students' application of forms internalized through social interaction. Participants saw that students' "resistance" to correcting these errors may be more a case of confusion over the correct usage or a lack of metalinguistic awareness.

Personal or cultural factors. The seminar discussions pointed to the fact that students' L1 and the contexts in which they commonly use English are just two possible influences on their English, specifically their writing. Another consideration was the extent to which students had had prior training as academic writers in their L1 and how that experience complemented or interfered with their academic work in a U.S. college setting. In fact, students come to a college composition class with a wide range of training, experience, and interest in writing. They may have had minimal experience, or they may be confident, proficient writers in their dominant language. ENG 101 instructors, however, may view cultural and personal variations as unacceptable deviations from the U.S. academic norm and offer instruction and

feedback based solely on this impression.

When these participants were asked to think about how U.S. academic writing is representative of American culture, they talked about a certain directness in U.S. culture. As they saw it, academic writing is typically linear and to the point—that is, in the canonical academic essay, a writer briefly introduces a topic, presents a thesis, and then develops and supports that thesis. The writer is expected to lay out all ideas in such a way that will be self-evident to the reader. This style of writing, however, may be foreign or even counterintuitive to what some students have previously learned or to the way they personally want to express their ideas (Stalker, 1997).

To demonstrate how students think about their experience as college writers, seminar participants watched an excerpt from the video *Writing across Borders* (Robertson, 2005), in which students spoke about being L2 writers, focusing specifically on the rhetorical differences, the differences in professors' expectations across cultures, and the connection between culture and writing style. One writer recounted that, in Vietnam, she had been penalized for writing about ideas not mentioned in the course, a skill highly valued in most U.S. academic settings. Others suggested that they resisted the adoption of the American academic style because, by giving over to the U.S. way, they felt they were giving up part of their academic or personal voice or their style of expression. Finally, several students suggested that the directness of American academic English was, in their eyes, simplistic, non-academic, or in some way "rude."

One significant revelation for the instructors was that students trained in non-U.S. academic rhetorical styles had to "unlearn" the style they had grown accustomed to or reconcile the American way with what they had previously learned. Responding to the video, one instructor commented, "It had never occurred to me that the *way* Americans write academically is new to many foreign students." He added that he realized students may use thought processes that are "different" from what he expects but that are not necessarily "broken" or wrong. Another instructor commented that understanding how students viewed writing and themselves as writers helped her to see the need to convey more clearly to her students what her expectations were for writing in her class. Other instructors picked up on the evidence of these students' having identities both as individuals and as writers, and expressed a desire to help their students maintain aspects of their personal and cultural identities. The respondents in Anderson's (2013) study echoed these sentiments.

In their discussions of who their students were and what their expectations of their students' college English were, instructors came to an eye-opening understanding that many of their students—not only those with an ESL designation—needed support in reaching the academic English norm valued in U.S. colleges. Reasons included not only the students' L1 and their prior learning but also the varieties of English most students are exposed to every day. These realizations opened the door for subsequent discussions of the pedagogical issues articulated by instructors in their applications. Prior to this seminar, many of these instructors had felt stuck, even angry, teaching a course that they were not prepared to teach with students who seemingly did not belong there. This perceived mismatch put the instructors and the students at a significant disadvantage. By this point in the discussion, however, the instructors were beginning to see greater homogeneity among their students in terms of language and literacy needs.

Conclusion

This report adds to the broader conversation taking place at U.S. colleges with large immigrant populations about bridging the divide between ESL college remediation and English composition and offers some insight into how these two disciplines can work together to enhance student success. It also speaks beyond ENG 101 to any course that requires a use of standard spoken or written forms of academic English. As ESL students transition to gatekeeper courses such as ENG 101, they continue to require pedagogy that is responsive to their needs as English language learners. This report suggests that attending to what English composition instructors know or assume about their learners, about the English

language itself, and about their students' orientation toward L2 writing is an essential first step in responding to their pedagogical questions or concerns.

Because the ability to move from remediation to credit-bearing courses is such an important aspect of a student's ability to successfully complete an academic degree, it is essential that college instructors increase their understanding of how this process takes place. Both students and instructors enter the classroom with linguistic and cultural assumptions; awareness or knowledge of these assumptions can help instructors to better plan their lessons and to give feedback to students more effectively.

To this end, ESL and English Department faculty need to reach out to one another to align their thinking and their curricular goals for the benefit of ESL students and all those who need more support, including those with less formal designations, such as the vast ESL population and other community college students with developing literacy skills. As seen in this report and in Anderson (2013), instructors welcome these discussions and opportunities for professional development. As one seminar instructor commented in her final reflection:

> I was noticing an avid hunger, among all of us, for further discussion of the implicit normative claims we are making about the world, in teaching standard written English, and grammar—or not—and thesis-driven essays, and the exam readings we choose as a department, and the individual readings we chose as teachers, etc., etc. . . .

As this instructor suggests, in addition to cross-curricular discussion or training, English departments themselves need to look at how they view and approach their role in teaching students whose first language is not English. This may involve departments' screening their instructors for their preparedness to teaching effectively in linguistically diverse settings. Furthermore, English departments need to come to an informed consensus on what grammar should be included and how it is taught and assessed in ENG 101. Ultimately, English departments need to respond to the CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers (2009), which offers guidance for developing and maintaining an active awareness of and engagement in the issues that affect second language learners and their needs. While the CCCC statement is geared primarily toward English departments with L2 writers, many of the principles therein should be taken into consideration by other departments within community colleges.

This college is extending the conversation and focusing on related pedagogical issues through popular Writing, Reading, ESL, and Critical Thinking across the Curriculum seminars and certifications. These discussions and professional development opportunities need to be not only firmly grounded in the observations and practices of this college but also in the growing literature on teacher preparedness and the needs of ESL students at the college level. To address these larger concerns, the college has also inaugurated its own Teaching Academy, a four-semester professional development opportunity for professors new to the college or new to teaching so that they may learn about the diverse community college student body and about effective pedagogical approaches to serve their learning needs. Part of the mission of the Teaching Academy is to add to the scholarship on teaching and learning with regard to community college instructors and students, including the large population of second language learners.

As the instructors demonstrate in this report, they are eager to have these conversations for their own professional development and, more important, for the benefit of their students.

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