

CASSL Report: **Second Language Student Writing: Obstacles and Realities**

Academic Year 2010-2011

Class: ESL W40

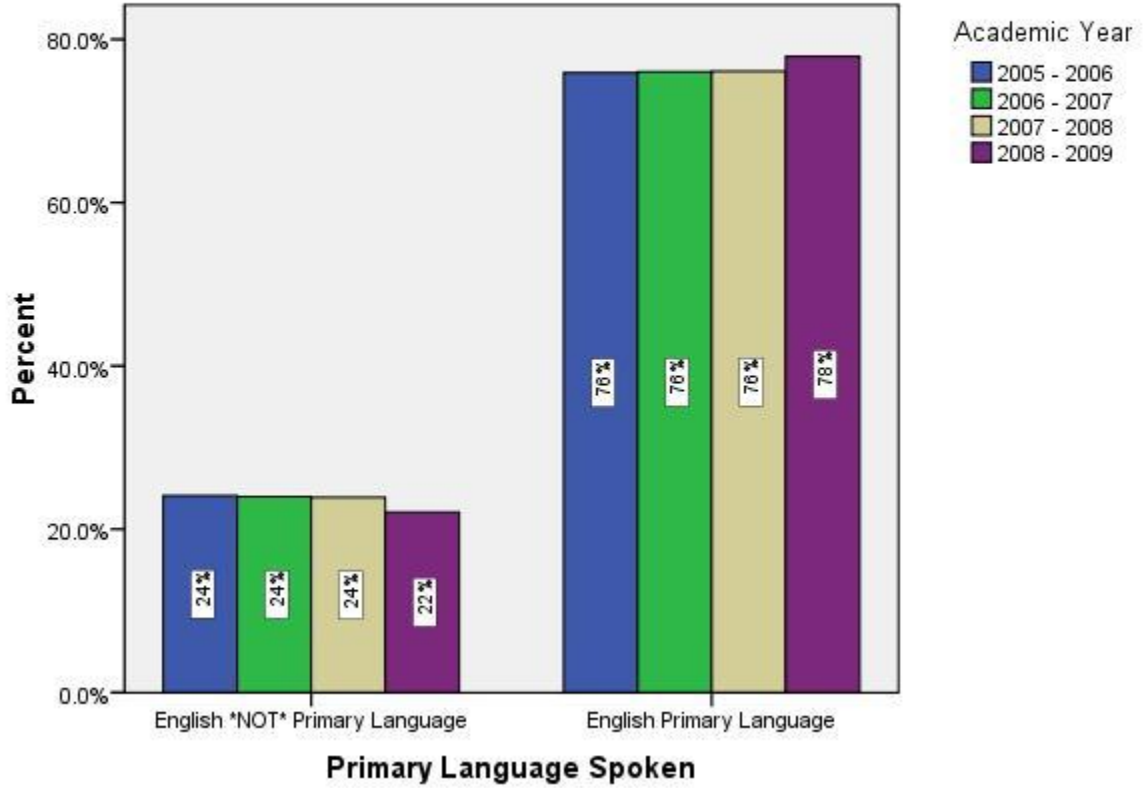
Professor: James B. Wilson, ESL

I. The Issue:

Students come to the doors of CRC ESL with a variety of backgrounds, abilities, and goals. Some come to learn for the sake of learning. Others enter with the idea of getting a job or improving one. Many have goals of attending mainstream classes or transferring to a four-year college or university – even obtaining a degree. In fact, those who declare transfer as an educational goal appears to be increasing as time continues, and between 22-24% of the students who attend CRC's mainstream student population do not speak English as their primary language.

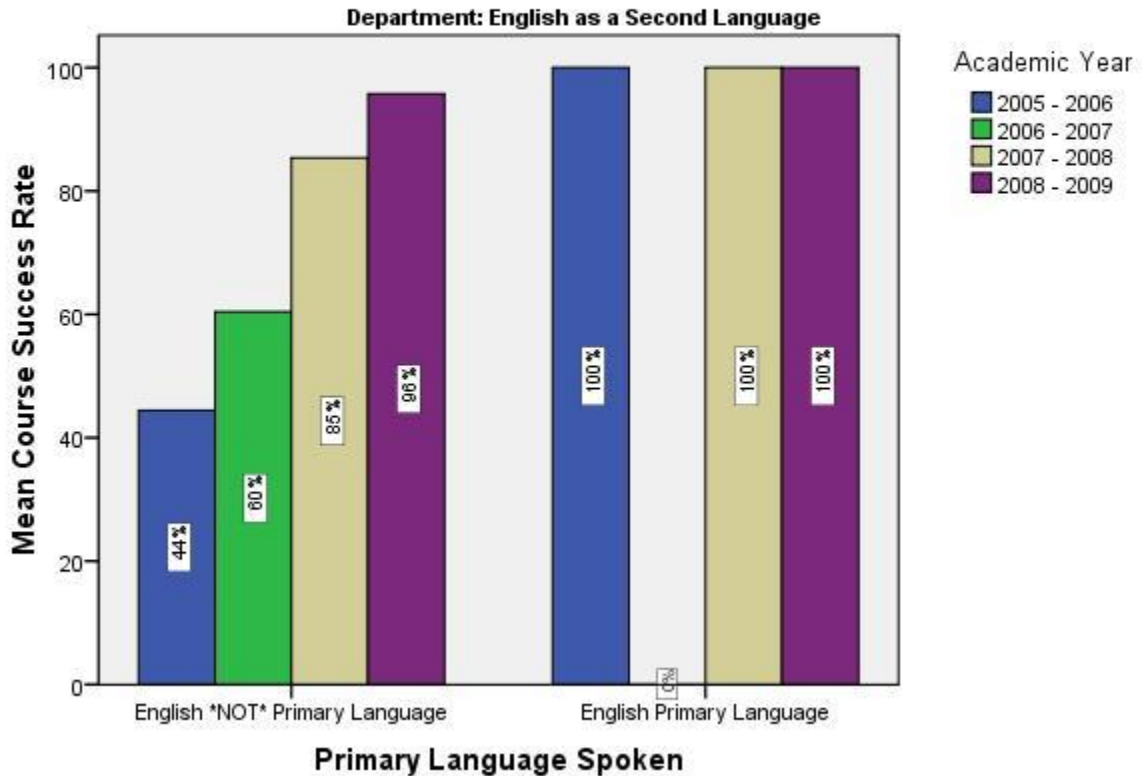
Thus, the issue is two-fold. First, we have students from a plethora of languages and backgrounds who wish to learn Standard English for educational purposes. Their first languages may differ in a variety of ways: alphabet, syntax, language concepts, left>right or right>left reading orientation, etc. Students attempt to learn content and language simultaneously, and the mistakes they make in their language production (speaking and writing) are different than the mistakes made by their native-language counterparts. The road to academic writing proficiency can be a long and uphill one and may be influenced by a student's first language, language crossover, age of learner, learner educational background, learner first language proficiency in one's native language, attitudes toward writing, work ethic, and a variety of other factors. Simply, typical ESL writers make errors that native-speaking writers do not make, and these errors may persist over time. Secondly, we have professors in college classes who, rightfully, expect the students in their classrooms to come equipped with the tools to successfully complete their courses. They may see commas in the wrong places, or more realistically, may see incorrect verb tenses, errors in subject-verb agreement, or singular nouns where plural ones should be, making their likelihood of failure or marginal success likely.

CRC Headcount By Primary Language Spoken (2005 - 2009)



- (Non-native English speakers as a percentage of the CRC student population).

CRC Average Course Success Rates By Academic Year By Primary Language (2005 - 2009)



- (Increasing success rates of non-native English speakers.)

II. The Research:

The plans for the purposes of this project are to have the time to research ESL student writing and disseminate the results to the campus and any departments that wish to have the information. Ideally, the instructor would formulate a model sentence and then have a variety of students from a variety of language backgrounds participate. The instructor would have students translate the sentence(s) into their first languages to show first-language models and then translate said phrases directly into English in order to show instructors where students are coming from in their goal of inculcating standard English into their writing. Shared with academic practitioners, the results may show syntactical differences, alphabet differences, right to left reading differences, and a wide variety of possibilities for the simple purpose of sensitizing the college community to our ESL students and second language writing trials and tribulations. Can a

Spanish speaker put an adjective before a noun, unlike their first-language practice? Of course. Can a native Russian speaker ever learn to use articles *a*, *an*, and *the*? Luckily, it can be done. On the way to those successful changes toward academia, however, relatively small writing production errors may get in the way and even stop potentially avid learners. Using a combination of student-driven data, CRC institutional research, and second language acquisition theory, the instructor would like to create a presentation to give background, show student first language samples/translations, and give practical suggestions to encourage second language learner success in mainstream college classes. (* See Addendum 1)

III. Anticipated Outcomes:

Assuming data collection proceeds as planned; the instructor would share this presentation at a CRC pre-college workshop intended for academic content area practitioners. They would get a feel for student first language writing, challenges toward the acquisition of Standard English as it relates to student writing, and some suggestions on the grading of second language learner writing. This could, in turn, influence teaching methodology, or at the very least, prompt a modification in assessment strategies for student writing production in mainstream classes. As an example, when a content area professor sees a well-written paper in terms of content and organization from a Russian speaker, should that paper be downgraded for not containing articles before singular nouns even though it does not interfere with meaning in the context of the entire essay? The researcher would better understand language-specific student errors by initiating a contrastive analysis of several main languages spoken by the CRC ESL student population. This should allow the instructor to better focus his time on specific errors of potential difficulty. All in all, more on campus would be aware of the particular difficulties that some face when attempting to learn English at a level sufficient for successful participation in an academic environment. Other outcomes, perhaps an adjustment of student learning outcomes in certain classes, could occur.

IV. Dissemination Plan:

A packet can be made up to give faculty during pre-college activities, or at

the very least, a link may be provided on the CASSL web-site, so that faculty may access some student samples, generalizations, and suggestions related to second-language student writers in their classrooms. Ideally, I will organize ideas, student samples, and suggestions into a PowerPoint Presentation to be made available on the CASSL web-site. Additionally, I will show some student examples in my fall 2011 ESL W40 class to empathize students toward their peers' writing. Given time and finances, I could make a presentation at the ORTESOL State Conference in November 2011 and/or the CATESOL State Conference in Oakland in April, 2012.

Addendum 1: Student Questionnaire

This is the voluntary student questionnaire used during the 1st week of classes during spring 2011 semester. (Student samples are available)

Writing Project Day 1 - Your teacher is doing a project to give other college teachers ideas about ESL student writing and the challenges that face ESL student writers in college classes. Your participation is appreciated.

Name _____

Country of origin _____

First language _____

- * Read the sample sentence.
- * Translate this sentence into your first language.
- * Translate that sentence back into English, but use the sentence structure of your first's language. This may be very different from the sample sentence.

How can the fine professors of Cosumnes River College help English as a second language students with their goal of improving their writing skills?

Translation into your 1st language: _____

Translation back into English: _____

** What is the biggest challenge you have to improve your English writing skills?* _____

James B Wilson, ESL, Cosumnes River College, wilsonj@crc.losrios.edu

Addendum 2: Writing Differences between Native and Non-Native English Speakers.

<p>Characteristics of effective writing in English for an American academic audience</p>	<p>Examples of some contrasting characteristics in other cultures/languages</p>
<p>Writing is viewed as a tool to accomplish a task (i.e. to express a point or present an argument)</p>	<p>Writing is viewed as a way of engaging the emotions through beautiful language</p>
<p>Focus on clarity, directness, and getting to the point</p>	<p>Focus on the language's richness or the ability to repeat ideas in a variety of ways; digression is seen as a way of linking the subject under discussion to other issues to show a wider range of knowledge</p>
<p>Direct, explicit statement of main idea(s)</p>	<p>No direct statement of main idea(s), with readers expected to infer the writer's main point</p>

<p>The writer is responsible for including explicit signals--such as transitions--to show logical links between ideas and make connections clear</p>	<p>Explicit signals are not necessary; the writer shows respect for the reader's intelligence to make inferences</p>
<p>Information is expected to be highly specific</p>	<p>Information is expected to be highly philosophical</p>
<p>Specific evidence (facts, statistics, examples) are used to support arguments</p>	<p>Traditional wisdom and authority are used to support arguments</p>
<p>Heavy use of deductive reasoning (movement from the general to the specific)</p>	<p>Heavy use of inductive reasoning (movement from the specific to the general)</p>
<p>Emphasis on the individuality and originality of ideas</p>	<p>Emphasis on traditional wisdom and shared cultural knowledge</p>

*Adapted from handout by Dr. Margery Tegey, "The International Student As Academic Writer," Georgetown University Writing Center Seminar, November 13, 2001.

Addendum 3: Similarities between Native Speakers (NS) and Non-Native Speakers (NNS):

Similarities between ESL Students and Native Speakers

Teachers who have taught only native speakers (NS) of English are sometimes uncertain of the best way to work with the English as a Second Language (ESL) students who come into their classes. While training in teaching ESL can offer much to help these students, teachers without this specialized training can also find much in their own backgrounds that will be useful, especially if they have composition experience or training. Most students who are placed into classes with native speakers should be reading and writing English at a reasonably advanced level, so teaching these ESL students will be similar in many ways to teaching native speakers. A mixed class of ESL and NS students will benefit from explicit and detailed instruction in different aspects of writing, using exercises designed not to drill for rote practice, but to elicit student understanding of the principles that have been explained. Academic writing is a new language for many students, native speakers as well as ESL. Here are some points of similarity between the two groups:

Placement:

Like native speakers, ESL students will have varying degrees of proficiency in reading and writing, and will not benefit from a reading and writing course if they are not placed correctly. Both NS and ESL students who are frustrated by reading and writing assignments that are too difficult may appear to be uncooperative, or may try to use inappropriate assistance.

Academic writing:

Both NS and ESL students may have little or no experience with the kind of academic writing required in college courses, especially if they were not educated in college preparatory program in the United States.

Vocabulary:

The development of a more academic vocabulary is also necessary for both ESL and NS students, and one of the best ways to accomplish this is through reading. Both kinds of students should be encouraged to read widely: newspapers, novels, and magazines are a few sources in print; online reading can help encourage speed and develop vocabulary, so suggesting links to interesting sites of any kind can help your students in their vocabulary development. Additionally, teachers may want to require that students keep a journal of their outside readings. A vocabulary notebook or journal section is good; class lists online can be interesting, too.

Revision:

The revision process is one of the keys to improvement in writing for both groups of students. ESL students, like native speakers, need to be encouraged not to spend too much energy in premature editing tasks. Sometimes a list of tasks in order or a flow chart can be useful, or you may want to explain why early editing may not be the most efficient use of time. Instead, provide some suggestions for more global revision tasks, such as organization and development, or attention to audience.

Conferencing:

Both ESL and NS students, who are learning a new way of writing, especially academic English, can benefit from one-on-one conferences with the instructor. The

conferences need not be lengthy; two-to-five minute mini-conferences on specific points (thesis sentences, development of paragraphs, editing issues) can allow time for each student to interact with the instructor in a class period, and can give the other students time to respond to the suggestions or plan their questions, or to work in groups or pairs.

Editing:

ESL and native speaker students will have many editing problems in common. Sentence boundary problems (fragments, comma splices, run-on sentences) and word ending problems (plurals and possessives, verb tense, etc.) are very common for both groups at this level of writing. Handbooks, online help, and writing centers are sources of assistance; you will probably have to spend some time in conferences, but accumulating a file of explanations and exercises will shorten this time in the long run.

Avoiding plagiarism:

The appropriate use and citation of other writers' work is often unfamiliar to NS and ESL students who have not been taught in college preparatory English classes. In addition to explaining the details of HOW to document, you should probably devote a few minutes to explaining WHY documentation is essential (a good handout or textbook or online reference can save time here, too).

Differences between ESL and Native Speaker Students

Much as ESL students may have in common with native speakers, they also have some significant differences. Cultural attitudes, different rhetorical models, and special sentence level problems continue to affect ESL writing even at higher levels.

Variety:

ESL students attend college for a variety of reasons; many plan to live in the United States, but many also plan to return to their own countries. Some areas may attract immigrants from one area of the world, while others may have international students from many different backgrounds; some students may come to regular English classes after completing an intensive English program; others may have moved to your area at a young age and attended high school in the United States. Students who have lived here for many years may speak very well and seem to fit in culturally, but may have problems in reading and writing very similar to those of native speaker students. Students who received most of their schooling in other countries may be accustomed to a very formal and demanding academic system, but even students who learned English in other countries may have been taught by teachers from the United States and may have learned a good bit about the academic culture of schools and colleges in this country. This range of diversity means that the teacher cannot make very many general assumptions about the characteristics of ESL students. You should try to get to know the ESL students as quickly as possible so that you can find the best way to work with each.

"Generation 1.5" or INTERNATIONAL?

Students who have come here at college age are often called international students, distinguished from students who have come here at middle school age or earlier. Students who have come to the US at an early age are often called "Generation 1.5" students, because they are not native speakers (second generation of immigrants often are) but have been here long enough to have acquired some oral fluency and some cultural attitudes. You may find that Gen 1.5 students prefer to work in groups with native speakers, may speak more fluently than they write, and may need more

encouragement to complete assignments. The Learning Center is an important resource for both groups, but international students may seek it out on their own while Gen 1.5 students may go only if require. But no generalizations are completely accurate--suit your guidance to the individual.

Attitudes toward school:

In many cultures, the teacher is regarded as an authority figure who must be shown the utmost respect and must never be bothered. This means that some international students will not realize that they should ask you for assistance if they are having difficulty. You may need to offer assistance, or even invite some students to your office hours if you can see that they have problems. In class, be willing to repeat difficult points and to give out assignments in writing whenever possible. Make students feel welcome in class. Students may be afraid that they will not be understood if they ask questions in class, or may be embarrassed to speak in front of a group. Be extremely careful not to embarrass them, and help the rest of the class learn that they can learn to listen more carefully. Model good interactions with ESL speakers for your native speakers--this may be one of the most important things you can teach.

Attitudes toward writing:

The purpose and the act of writing may vary widely from culture to culture, as may the idea of what constitutes good writing. While American academics may believe that good writing consists of the writer's original thought, supported by reference to other clearly-identified writers, other cultures may expect writing to consist of reiteration of material from traditional scholarship, while yet others may be grounded primarily in oral traditions and may not see any well-defined purpose for writing. The direct statement of the thesis is one of the central lessons of many pre-academic composition courses in the United States, but in the writing traditions of many cultures, such a statement might be considered an insult to the reader's intelligence, while indirectness may be prized. For this reason, the rhetorical sections of The User's Guide offer clear explanations of why each part of the essay is considered important in academic writing in this culture, as well as offering a number of models in Chap. 25 to illustrate the principles and help the student form a mental schema of the writing valued in this culture.

Written versus oral language:

Students' ability to read and write may be very different from their ability to speak and listen. A student who has been in this country since childhood or early teens may be able to converse fluently, but may never have developed accuracy in writing. Another student who learned English as a foreign language while living in another country may be able to comprehend and compose accurately, but may have difficulty with the spoken language. It's important to evaluate the student's ability in each medium, and not to assume that ability in one mode entails ability in the other.

Time:

Probably the greatest difference between the ESL writer and the native speaker is the amount of time required. Be ready to give ESL students extra time to complete assignments out of class, but do require some evidence that they are making progress. Beware of stereotypes! While many, even most ESL students are very hardworking and conscientious, immature or overly dependent people exist in every culture. We do not help students by allowing them to avoid work. Give assistance, time, and referral to resources, but be sure that you know that students are continuing to do as much as

they can on their own. Ask your students how much time they are spending on each assignment to give you an idea of how demanding each task is for ESL students. ESL students may take much longer to read an assignment. Usually this is not a problem for homework, but can definitely be a problem in class. If the material is very difficult, it would probably be better to assign most reading as homework, at least for the first reading. If you usually assign a number of long readings, you might want to get a sense of how much time this really takes for the ESL student.

Revision:

ESL students will benefit strongly from being allowed to revise. Even if you do not use a portfolio grading system, you should be willing to look at drafts. Do not rewrite the paper for the students, however. Read over the paper and set revision goals. If organization is a problem, for example, you might look at a model of a well-organized paper, show the student how to make an outline or plan for writing, and help him/her generate a sample thesis and outline. Then the student should try to make a plan independently.

Editing:

Give students as much responsibility as possible for editing their own papers. Try underlining or circling errors without explaining them and asking the student to try to correct them before you give the correction. If the student can't make the correction, show the correct form. Explain the form if you can, since ESL students often have good understanding of grammar, but realize that many of the problems your students have will result from idioms or exceptions to rules. Sometimes there really is no rule-based explanation; most students understand that language is like that.

Focus on selected features:

Too much detailed input on every possible error will simply confuse your students. Tell your ESL students that you will focus first on the greatest problems and go on to others later, because these may be problems that interfere with a reader's understanding of the writing or they may be so pervasive that they distract the reader.

Group work:

Both native speakers and ESL students may feel hesitant about working in groups with each other, and yet this is an excellent opportunity for both to learn about each other and acquire better listening and speaking skills. Suggest that they listen carefully and be willing to repeat statements more slowly. Keep an eye on the group, and end the group work if it is clear that the students cannot communicate. Clear instructions for structured responses probably work better than free-floating discussion groups. The section on working with groups in Chap. 12 may be helpful for students who are not used to group work.

Peer editing:

Working in pairs with native speakers may work well, since often the ESL student may be familiar with the rules and the native speaker with the idiomatic usage. Again, clear instructions (look for fragments, check documentation form, etc.) give the students guidance on what should be discussed. See suggestions on communication above. Chap. 12 also helps students with some basic principles of peer editing.

Writing Center:

If there are ESL tutors in the Writing Center, ESL students will benefit from spending time working on papers in a one-to-one format. If you have students with many sentence-level problems, you may want to require them to work in the Writing Center.

Grades:

Students may seem very anxious about their grades, and teachers sometimes feel pressured by this concern. Try to focus as much as possible on formative responses in early drafts of papers but let students know clearly what your standards are for the final graded product, whether it is a single paper or a portfolio. Models of acceptable responses to different assignments also help students evaluate their own progress.

ESL logs:

ESL students may also benefit from a log used to record new vocabulary, collocations, and idioms. In this log, new vocabulary items (either words not encountered before, like *attenuate*, or familiar words used in a new way, like *satellite* used to mean auxiliary) may be recorded along with their meanings, as may collocations (words commonly used together in a language—for example, *tell a joke* compared to *say a prayer*) and idioms (phrases whose meaning is not clear from the dictionary definition of the individual words, sometimes used metaphorically—for example, *hold sway over*, *the whole enchilada*, *on a roll*). Students who have taken ESL classes may already be familiar with such logs; others may need examples. Here is a sample sheet from a log, entering the examples given here:

Entry	Type of Entry	Part of Speech	Meaning	Used in Phrases
Attenuate	Vocabulary	Verb	weaken	Attenuate the power Attenuated voice
Satellite	Vocabulary	Noun or adjective	auxiliary or additional	Satellite program Satellite campus
Tell a joke	Collocation	Verb and object		Tell a joke Laugh at a joke Tell a story Tell the truth
Say a prayer	Collocation	Verb and object		Say hello Say what you mean Say it this way
Hold sway over	Idiom	Verb + prep	control, dominate	He held sway over the company They hold sway over the party

Addendum 4: Points and Suggestions (Many thanks to the work of Nancy Kreml, Laurie Berry, and Jan Jake of Midlands Technical College for the examples)

Some ESL students will have more understanding of the grammar of English than many native speakers; they may know what subjects and verbs are, and

even the names of tenses, so that errors like subject verb agreement can be explained. Indeed, many of the most common problems will be the same ones that native speakers have: verb and pronoun agreement, fragments and comma splices, spelling. However, in many areas there will continue to be errors that may look awkward or unnatural to teachers who are not used to ESL writing.

Interference from first language: Most sentence level problems do not result from transferring features from the students' original languages, but from problems inherent in learning English. However, some language backgrounds do result in certain areas of difficulty.

- Speakers of most Asian languages, for example, will find articles and word endings (-s, -ed) a source of great difficulty, because their languages do not inflect (especially for time).
- On the other hand, because European languages are similar to English but not exactly like it, speakers may use "false cognates" in vocabulary and false analogies in grammar.
- Many languages, like Spanish, do not require a stated subject for verbs ("Came to town")
- Arabic, Chinese and others do not require a stated linking verb ("We busy").

A few generalizations:

Vocabulary: An ESL student may use words in ways that sound very strange to us, and yet we may not be able to explain why they seem strange. As native speakers acquiring the language, we learn not only the meaning of a word but also how it can be combined with other words. For example, we pay a bill but cash a check; an ESL writer might think it correct to pay a check. When students misuse words in these ways, it's probably simplest just to show them the correct collocation (combination of words), unless the explanation of the reason can be very simple and clear. Selecting synonyms and using phrasal verbs may cause special difficulties for ESL students, and may be treated the same way.

Prepositions: Although some prepositions have a very clear meaning (sleeping *on* the bed is different from sleeping *under* the bed), others may have very overlapping meanings and may in different dialects of English be used in different ways: "he is at the store" vs. "he is to the store"; even within one dialect, a slight change in the sentence can change

the preposition: "I sympathize with her" vs. "I have sympathy for her." We should not be surprised to find even a fairly good writer of English writing "I sympathize for her." Prepositions are also used in many English idioms and phrasal verbs, e.g. *making out*, which is very different from *making up*.

Complex Sentences: Students whose spoken English is good may still find subordination confusing because they practice it so little. Some examples of problems: students may attempt to use a clause as an object of a preposition ("I am late because of my car broke down"); they may not drop the original pronoun when substituting a relative pronoun ("This is the test which I took it last week"). Some advanced ESL students may write very long sentences in which many subordinate clauses occur in along but awkward sentence.

Verb forms: ESL students have problems with choosing between simple present and progressive tenses (I study now vs. I am studying now), modals (can vs. could), and selection and sequence of tenses. Most of the verb rules are clear and learnable, but speakers of languages that do not show time by changing the verb (Chinese, Korean, etc.) may take longer to understand this, and speakers of languages similar to English may mistakenly transpose the rules of their language onto English.

Punctuation: Many languages use the same punctuation marks, even those that use very different systems of writing (Arabic and Chinese, for example). The problem for ESL students is that the marks are the same, but the rules for using them are very different. A comma may be used between two sentences in many languages, for example.

Articles (A, An, The): The rules governing the usage of articles in English are very complex and difficult to master; linguists still argue over what the rules are, exactly. Speakers of languages that do not have articles (e.g., Russian and Chinese) may never completely master article usage, but even speakers of Arabic, Spanish, or even some dialects of English may have such different rules for article usage that they will continue to write "we must protect the nature" (compared to "we must protect the environment").

Time: Probably the greatest difference between the ESL writer and the native speaker is the amount of time required. Be ready to give ESL students extra time to complete assignments out of class, but do require some evidence that they are making progress.

Beware of stereotypes! While many, even most ESL students are very hardworking and conscientious, immature or overly dependent people exist in every culture. We do not help students by allowing them to avoid work. Give assistance, time, and referral to resources, but be sure that you know that students are continuing to do as much as they can on their own. Ask your students how much time they are spending on each assignment.

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Editing: Give students as much responsibility as possible for editing their own papers. Try underlining or circling errors without explaining them and asking the student to try to correct them before you give the correction. If the student can't make the correction, show the correct form. Explain the form if you can since ESL students often have good understanding of grammar, but realize that many of the problems your students have will result from idioms or exceptions to rules. Sometimes there really is no explanation; most students understand that language is like that.

Focus on selected features: Too much detailed input on every possible error will simply confuse your students. Tell your ESL students that you will focus first on the greatest problems and go on to others later.

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Peer editing: Working in pairs with native speakers may work well, since often the ESL student will be familiar with the rules and the native speaker

with the idiomatic usage. Again, clear instructions (look for fragments, check documentation form, etc.) give the students more benefit than does simply telling them to check each other's papers. See suggestions on communication above.

Here's where the students are coming from, folks!

For Addendum 5: A few examples (please email James Wilson: wilsonj@crc.losrios.edu)