

Researching the Local/Writing the International:
Writing Centers as Rich Sites for Investigating Writing Cultures

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Biography

Terry Myers Zawacki directs George Mason University's highly ranked Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program and, until stepping down in 2010, she also directed the well regarded University Writing Center. Her publications include the co-authored *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines: Research on the Academic Writing Life*, the co-edited *Writing Across the Curriculum: A Critical Sourcebook*, and articles on writing centers and writing fellows, alternative discourses, writing in learning communities, feminism and composition, writing assessment, and WAC and second language writing. The latter was the subject of her keynote address at the 2010 International WAC conference and continues to be the focus of her scholarship, most recently a special issue of *Across the Disciplines*, which she co-edited and which includes collaborative articles by scholars in the WAC and ESL fields; she's currently working on a co-edited collection on the same topic with articles featuring similar collaborations and international voices.

Dr. Zawacki serves on the editorial boards of *Across the Disciplines*, *The WAC Journal*, and the *Digital Books* series on the WAC Clearinghouse, for which she is also the Writing Fellows section editor. She is a member of the Consultants Board of the International WAC Network, the College Composition and Communication (4Cs) Committee on the Globalization of Postsecondary Writing Instruction and Research, and the Scientific Committee for the International Society for the Advancement of Writing Research. She also acts as the writing-in-the-disciplines specialist for the Diana Hacker series of handbooks, among these *A Writer's Reference* and *The Bedford Handbook*. Prof. Zawacki is the recipient of a George Mason University Excellence in Teaching award; she teaches graduate courses in composition theory and pedagogy and undergraduate courses in ethnography and advanced writing in the disciplines.

Good morning, everyone. I'm delighted to be here with you today and to have been asked to give this plenary address. Thank you, Paula, for inviting me and for being such a gracious host.

Student Voices

"To be bilingual might be my greatest advantage. I have more words now."

Arab student from American University of Sharjah

quoted by Lynne Ronesi in "Who Am I as an Arab English-Speaker? Perspectives from Female University Students in the United Arab Emirates"

"I would really love to learn nice words, because I do have ideas, and I do want to put something down, but I am short of words."

Pakistani international student at George Mason University

quoted by Terry Myers Zawacki and Anna Habib in "Will Our Stories Help Teachers Understand?: Multilingual Students Talk about Identity, Voice, and Expectations across Academic Communities"

I begin with the two voices you see on the screen because they capture at the outset the abundant strengths multilingual students bring to their writing as well as the frustrations many also experience as they try to find the right words in English to express what they know and have learned. The focus of my talk today will be on that push-pull tension we writing teachers and tutors often feel between valuing these students' rich linguistic abilities and the responsibility we also feel to help them write in the ways expected by their teachers across the curriculum.

I'll tell you about some of the research I've been doing on the academic writing experiences of English first and second language students, along with some of the research I've been reading by scholar-practitioners from the MENA region. As I'll explain you are uniquely situated to make valuable contributions to the study of English second language writers across the curriculum.

You'll see on the screen some of the acronyms I'll be using today: English L1 and L2 as shorthand for students whose first language—L1—is English and L2 for students for whom English is a second or additional language. While I'll be using English L2 and sometimes ESL as convenient abbreviations, I realize they don't begin to capture the linguistic diversity of the students you work with in your centers.

WAC, another acronym I'll be using that might sound odd to many of you, stands for writing across the curriculum. WAC denotes both a process and a program that you may be familiar with. Writing centers and writing fellows programs have long provided vital support to WAC efforts, whether or not institutions have formal WAC programs.

Before I turn back to the focus of my talk, I'll add that this is my third trip to the Gulf region. I've traveled twice before to Ras al Khaimah in the United Arab Emirates, when I went to work with the faculty at the campus my university had opened there on how to teach with writing. It won't be surprising to many of you to hear that the RAK faculty were not particularly eager to include writing in their courses. As with faculty at Mason's U.S. campuses, they wondered how they could cover the content if they also had to teach writing. And, also like faculty in the US,

many explained that they didn't know how to talk about writing with students or didn't feel comfortable enough themselves as writers to help student writers. This was especially the case for faculty for whom English was a second or additional language. While George Mason ended our involvement with the RAK campus in 2009, I've continued to be very interested in the scholarship coming out of this region on teaching writing to multilingual learners across the curriculum.

In preparation for this talk, I went back to reread the three issues of the MENAWCA newsletter featured on your site. What good memories the fall 2008 inaugural issue brought back when I saw an article I'd written "Teaching Faculty to Teach Effectively with Writing at George Mason's RAK/UAE Campus: A WAC Learning Experience."

In that same 2008 newsletter, acting MENAWCA president Jodi LeFort issued a strong call to members to conduct research and to share their local research plans and projects with others in the region. She wrote: "The challenges of establishing a writing center outside of the US are apparent to all of us [... yet] there is virtually no literature about writing centers outside of North America." While there's now a growing body of literature on and from the region, today I'm going to repeat LeFort's call for conducting research on your local sites and sharing that research, not just among yourselves but even more widely with other composition and writing center professionals who can benefit from your investigations of writers, writing, and teaching and tutoring practices in such culturally and linguistically rich sites as the writing centers and programs in which you work.

A Translingual Approach

"This approach sees difference in language not as a barrier to overcome or as a problem to manage, but as a resource for producing meaning in writing, speaking, reading, and listening.

When faced with difference in language, this approach asks: What might this difference do? How might it function expressively, rhetorically, communicatively? For whom, under what conditions, and how?

Against the common argument that students must learn 'the standards' to meet demands by the dominant, a translingual approach recognizes that ...such demands are contingent and negotiable."

"Language Difference in Writing: Towards a Translingual Approach" by Bruce Horner, Min-Zhan Lu, Jacqueline Jones Royster, and John Trimbur

The need for such research from sites like yours in the MENA region is particularly critical in support of the world Englishes and translingual arguments being made in the US and elsewhere by scholars such as Suresh Canagarajah, Paul Matsuda, Alistair Pennycook, Bruce Horner and others to recognize and value the many varieties of written English being used around the world.

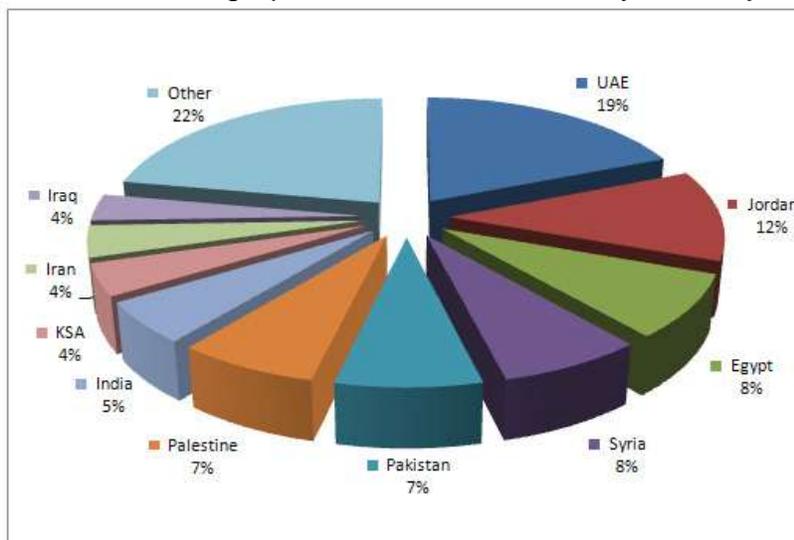
At your institutions, English is enriched and reshaped every day by the multilingual speakers and writers with whom you work. But what do these Englishes look like? What diverse voices, grammars, syntaxes, conventions, and organizational arrangements are being used by writers whose first or native language is not English? And how far can any or all of these elements

depart from what is perceived to be “standard academic English” before they become unacceptable or unintelligible to their intended audiences?

These are crucial questions to study in light of the globalization missions being enacted by our higher education institutions, missions embodied by so many of the institutions where you’re working today. And, given the plurilingualism of your institutions, I can think of few more exciting places for investigating the ways academic English is written, taught, and tutored.

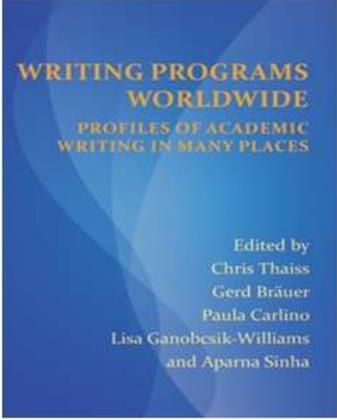
As I’ve been reading some of the research coming out of the MENA region, I see that questions we in the US have been asking about English language learners’ diverse writing processes and products are also questions many of you have been asking. But, unlike institutions in the US that assume an English monolingual culture, even though that’s clearly not the reality, you expect your students to come with vastly complex language identifications and personal histories. These are vividly detailed, for example, in an article by Zenger, Mullin, and Haviland “Reconstructing Teacher Roles through a Transnational Lens: Learning with/in the American University of Beirut,” forthcoming in a WAC and Second Language Writing collection I’m co-editing.

Student Demographics American University of Sharjah



I could also see that cultural and linguistic diversity described on the website of the American University of Sharjah, which, as I saw when I looked at the websites of many of the MENA region institutions, is one of the few to include detailed demographics on language and ethnicity, along with gender breakdowns, which most of your institutions do include.

With so many of your students coming from different cultural backgrounds and schooling experiences, not only can you *not* assume a common culture, but you also can’t assume, it seems to me, that there’s a standard English from which their writing is diverging. Yet, even though they come with so many different Englishes, at your institutions you are charged with helping them in your courses and writing centers to produce standard academic English, however this is interpreted by those with and for whom you work.



**WRITING PROGRAMS
WORLDWIDE**
PROFILES OF ACADEMIC
WRITING IN MANY PLACES

Edited by
Chris Thaiss
Gerd Bräuer
Paula Carlino
Lisa Ganobcsik-Williams
and Aparna Sinha

<http://wac.colostate.edu/books/wpww/>

[Chapter 16. The Department of Rhetoric and Composition at the American University in Cairo: Achievements and Challenges](#), Emily Golson and Lammert Holdijk

[Chapter 37. Writing Programs Worldwide: Profile of the American University of Sharjah \(AUS\)](#), Lynne Ronesi

And so, while our multilingual students are wonderful resources on how writers learn to navigate across cultural, educational, disciplinary, and sociolinguistic borders of all kinds, today I want to talk about the challenges these students can also present to writing centers and instructors who teach writing or writing-intensive courses. These include challenges that I've seen described in the literature from your region, such as, for example, those described by Emily Golson and Lammert Holdijk in their profile of the writing program at the American University of Cairo for the collection *Profiles of Writing Programs Worldwide*: “Because Egyptian culture privileges oral exchange over reading and writing, learning is primarily associated with memorization and repetition. ...” and “some students rely too heavily on sources or turn to more accomplished friends for help with writing a paper.” To address that challenge and to combat plagiarism, they explain, their program is now emphasizing voice, critical thinking, and audience.

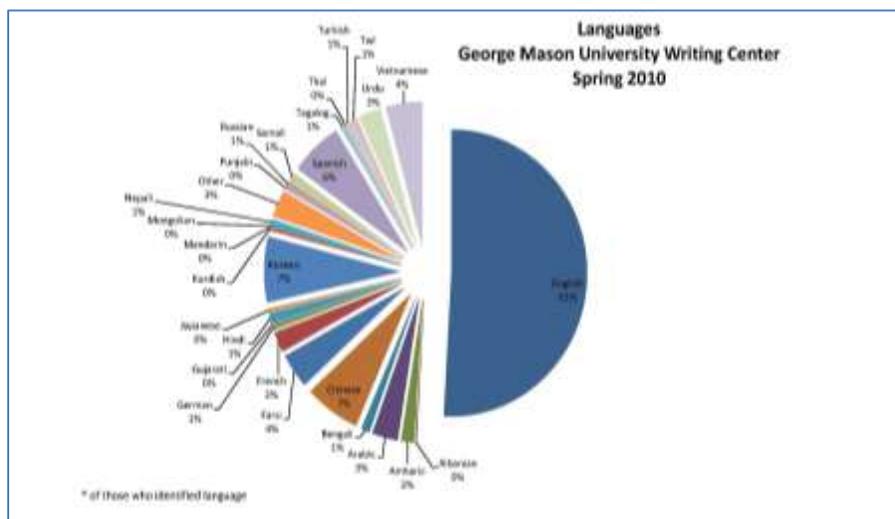
In the same collection, Lynne Ronesi describes the emphasis the American University of Sharjah has been placing on process approaches and intellectual ownership given the challenge of teaching students to write for college when so many secondary schools in the UAE teach through rote learning and memorization and where students are shaped by a collectivist culture that values sharing of work and ideas.

Some writing-in-English challenges noted by George Mason RAK faculty:

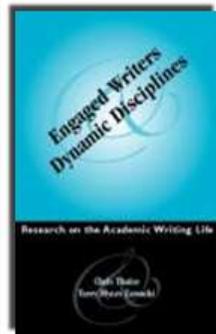
- “When vocabulary that was specific to one’s own culture and accepted as correct ‘English’ was not considered so in another linguistic environment.”
- “How much editing help is too much, and when does the work stop being yours.”
- “Figuring out what you can copy from books and what you can’t.”

When I asked the faculty I worked with at George Mason’s RAK campus about the challenges they faced when writing in English for their advance degrees, they too said much the same thing.

All of these challenges are similar in kind if not degree to what faculty and students at George Mason’s Virginia campus have told me when I interviewed them for the research I’m currently doing on English L2 students’ experiences with academic writing and faculty experiences teaching with writing in their linguistically diverse classrooms. While the faculty are often concerned about students copying the work of others without proper credit and their unconventional phrasing and organizational choices, the English L2 students are just as concerned—and confused—about what it means to be original, what voices and organizational structures are correct for the assigned task, and, in general, what makes writing “good” when teachers’ expectations seem to be so different from course to course.



My research on how students write and faculty teach with writing in the disciplines began over ten years ago amidst arguments in WAC and composition to be more open to students’ diverse written voices as alternatives to the standard ways of writing expected in the academy. However, my interest in these “alternative discourse” arguments, as they were being called, was much more than academic. As director of a writing center and writing across the curriculum program at one of the most linguistically and culturally diverse institutions in the US, I had a pressing need to understand faculty expectations for their student writers and the writing challenges experienced by the students who came to the writing center for assistance. What did I need to know to prepare tutors for these challenges and to help faculty better understand and help their student writers?



Research focused on:

- Faculty writing and teaching-with-writing practices
- Students' understanding of teachers' expectations, how they learn to write in their disciplines, and how they understand what it means to be original and write with voice.

This on-the-ground need-to-know led initially to the research I undertook with my colleague Chris Thaiss on students' and faculty perceptions of standards for writing in their disciplines, how students learned these standards, and how open faculty were to alternative ways of writing in courses they teach. For this research, we interviewed faculty and surveyed students across the disciplines, conducted student focus groups, and analyzed the essays students wrote for proficiency credit for an advanced writing course. We reported on our findings, some of which I'll share with you today, in *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines*. The voices of English second language writers, however, were notably absent in our study, not because we wanted to **exclude** these students but because few volunteered to participate, perhaps because they lacked the confidence to speak about their own academic writing experiences.

“For many of these second language students, the primary issue is not just grammatical but it's having the vocabulary, the ability, [to convey] the level of ideas they are trying to express. And sometimes I question whether or not they're really understanding or just memorizing.”

Sociology professor, English L1

Yet these were the very voices that I and the writing center tutors I worked with every day needed to hear. And that faculty also needed to hear given that one of the questions they asked me most frequently had to do with how to respond to and fairly grade the writing of their second language students. Too often, they explained, they could not determine whether the student had understood the material being written about when there were second language errors of so many different kinds, ranging from word choice, syntax, sentence and paragraph structure, use of sources, and so on, as illustrated by the quote you see from a sociology professor.

And so, inspired by the Oregon State DVD *Writing Across Borders*, I enlisted the assistance of the writing center associate director, Anna Habib, who grew up and was educated in Beirut and Cyprus, and three peer tutors, all of whom were also multilingual writers, to begin a study of the writing experiences of the second language writers in their home countries and across the curriculum at George Mason.

My writing center co-researchers and I began by recruiting and interviewing undergraduate and graduate international students who were regular visitors to the writing center. When we explained the purpose of our research—to help us understand the influence of different languages and cultures on the academic writing they produced—several asked whether this research would also help their teachers understand them better and appreciate their efforts to “style [their] writing to suit what is demanded here,” a “bittersweet experience,” as Kanishka, a student from Sri Lanka, lamented, because of what must be “[left] by the wayside.” The students’ hope that teachers would listen to their concerns led us to interview faculty from across the curriculum to find out how aware they are of the academic identities their multilingual students are leaving behind and how sympathetic they are to these students’ efforts to re-invent themselves as writers in the U.S. academy.



Research focused on:

- English Second Language (L2) students’ experiences with academic writing across the curriculum
(26 student participants from 20 different countries)
- Faculty perspectives on working with English L2 writers in their courses across the curriculum

In doing this research, I’m always reminded of a guiding writing center principle: *We tutor the writer and the writing*. It is the locally situated research that helps us understand not only who these multilingual writers are but also the writing their teachers expect them to produce. Locally, our research findings were first published by George Mason as *Valuing Written Accents: Non-native Students Talk about Identity, Academic Writing, and Meeting Teachers’ Expectations*, a slender monograph we used for tutor training and also circulated widely to faculty.

<http://writtenaccents.gmu.edu>



Because of high demand for the publication, both at Mason and at other institutions, we created a website to disseminate our findings more widely. Anna Habib and I have since written several articles on our findings, including one that will appear in the book collection I'm currently co-editing *WAC AND SECOND LANGUAGE WRITERS: RESEARCH TOWARDS LINGUISTICALLY AND CULTURALLY INCLUSIVE PROGRAMS AND PRACTICES*.

We see each of these publications as **action research** with findings intended to help teachers and tutors understand the writing experiences of these diverse students, which we hope will, in turn, help them to develop more inclusive and culturally informed practices. There's also a strong reflective element in doing this ethnographic research, as we discovered. Both students and faculty thanked us after the interviews for giving them the opportunity to reflect on their writing and teaching-with-writing practices. The faculty in particular said that our questions along with hearing what the English L2 students said helped them be more understanding of the challenges they're facing.

For me and writing center associate director Anna Habib as well, the reflection involved in the process of coding and analyzing the interview transcripts proved to be an enormously productive, leading me to immediate changes in how we trained tutors in setting session agendas, balancing higher and lower order concerns, and deciding when to use directive/non-directive approaches.

In the conclusion of her richly detailed dissertation study of the perceptions of tutors and tutees in a Middle Eastern writing center, Maria Eleftheriou comes to a similar conclusion about the value of qualitative research like that she conducted, which involved tutors and tutees observing and analyzing their videotaped sessions, not only for what the process revealed about the distinctive nature of individual sessions but also because the methods themselves proved to be a valuable exercise in reflection for all of the participants involved.

Which brings me back to my call to you to carry out similar investigations of the writers and writing at your local sites, not only because your findings will inform and enhance the way you tutor and teach the diverse student writers at your institutions but also because, if more widely disseminated, your research will contribute to ongoing conversations in composition and writing center studies around the global Englishes that students, tutors, and teachers are negotiating together.

My research questions

What does it mean to be original, to think critically, and to write with voice?

What makes writing “good” according to different teachers and in different courses?

How do students learn to meet teachers’ expectations for their writing in courses across the curriculum?

And now let me turn to some of the questions and findings I and my co-researchers present in both *Valuing Written Accents* and *Engaged Writing and Dynamic Disciplines*, focusing on several of the same concerns I saw articulated in your descriptions of the student writers at your institutions: What does it mean to be original, to think critically, and to write with voice? What makes writing “good” according to different teachers and in different courses? How do students learn to meet teachers’ expectations for their writing in courses across the curriculum?

“The way you write is not necessarily just the language you learn but the values and beliefs and cultural norms that influence the patterns of thinking that then influence the writing, so there are a lot of things that are hidden.”

Sandarshi, international student from Sri Lanka

As I’ll explain, even students whose first language is English often find it hard to figure out what their teachers mean by voice and originality and what they consider good writing, so it’s not surprising that English language learners would be especially challenged when they try to understand and meet these same teachers’ expectations. There are indeed “a lot of things that are hidden,” as Sandarshi said when we asked about learning to write for teachers in her graduate program in the U.S.

During my and Anna Habib’s early interviews with the international students we’d recruited from the writing center, we asked whether they had ever learned by memorizing and/or directly “copying” the writing of others since we knew many had been taught writing in this way, as Habib herself had, for example. In asking this question, we were interested in hearing them talk about how they had been schooled in writing before coming to the US and how they might interpret teachers’ expectations for original and critical thinking.

We quickly saw, however, that the students we interviewed seemed to become defensive about the term “copy” and were quick to explain that they knew that copying from someone else’s work was wrong and considered to be plagiarism. So we changed our line of questioning to ask more generally what teaching writing practices the teachers in their home countries had used. As they described to us the kinds of copying and memorization exercises they had done, we could see how much their home cultures had influenced their sense of how a student was expected to treat the work of a scholar and who, certainly not a student, is allowed to originate ideas and critique the work of others.

This was especially the case for the student informants who had come from cultures, like those in the MENA region, where memorization and imitation are practices by which students typically learn to acquire the appropriate voices for school. I’m sure what Sri and Ayesha told us about how they learned to write in their home countries will sound familiar to you.

“You learn it by memory and put it back on the page word for word. It was normally not considered good to move away from the text. Your own expression was not really accepted, unlike here where there’s a lot of emphasis on your thoughts and expression.”

Sri, International student from India

“The teachers would just think that the whole class is the same and, when someone writes the best essay, we are supposed to write the same way. But over here, I was really amazed when the teacher told me to put down your [own] thoughts first. [Back home] we were not allowed to use our own ideas.”

Ayesha, international student from Pakistan

Similarly, the ten student tutors who participated in Lynne Ronesi’s study “Who Am I as an Arab English-Speaker? Perspectives from Female University Students in the United Arab Emirates” explained that, in Arabic, they were not expected to explore topics critically but rather to restate “things that are already perceived to be the truth.” For Ronesi’s participants, it was clear that they could not be scholars in Arabic at their level even though they felt a strong sense of cultural identity through the language and appreciated its beauty and depth.

“When I am writing in English, I think in a completely different way. I like both languages, but I think Urdu is much richer and much sweeter. I don’t know, I just feel it.”

Ayesha, international student from Pakistan

Many of the students Habib and I interviewed also expressed a similar strong sense of cultural belonging when they wrote in their home language, even though they too understood their subordinate role in relationship to the scholars whose work they memorized. Ayesha said, for example:

When I am writing in English, I think in a completely different way. I like both languages, but I think Urdu is much richer and much sweeter. I don't know, I just feel it.

It's not hard to imagine, then, why some of the students we talked to felt offended or lost confidence when teachers criticized the rich and beautiful written voices that were valued in their home countries. As Kanishka told us,

I had my initial friction between cultures when I was told over and over again 'you have to cut down, clean up [your writing]'. I was very offended because I came with a lot of confidence behind me and suddenly I find it's totally different. But it didn't take me long to catch up though. I realized that any nice language I use is wasted. No one here is going to look at it that way.

“[My professor] gave examples of how to express ... in a better way, so I did some reading and when I think piece is very impressive, I ...try to write it down or remember it in another way, and I will try to use it when I write next time.”

Haifeng, international student from China

To catch up to their teachers' expectations in the US, many of the students we talked to said they paid close attention to the styles of the texts they read and how their teachers phrased things in class and on assignment sheets. Haifeng from China said, for example, “when I think piece of writing is very impressive, I try to write it down or remember it another way, and I will try to use it next time I write.”

Yet this mimicking process often led to charges of plagiarism from their teachers, which was particularly puzzling to these writers who had been told they needed to learn to write in the voices and styles expected in their disciplines and who had learned to do that in their previous schooling experiences by memorizing others' texts.

“I'd like to be original, but I have no idea what my professor's ideas of originality are.”

English L1 student participant in research for *Engaged Writers & Dynamic Disciplines*

But English second language writers are not the only ones who have trouble figuring out what teachers might mean by originality and writing in one's own voice, as Chris Thaiss and I found

in our research for *Engaged Writers and Dynamic Disciplines*. “I’d like to be original,” one English L1 student told us, “but I have no idea what my professors’ ideas of originality are.” Another English L1 student who had been an accomplished peer tutor in the writing center reported her confusion when one of her teachers criticized her for a lack of originality and voice in her writing while another told her that she needed to learn how to use other scholars’ research before attempting to develop her own voice.

Many of the second language writers Habib and I interviewed also found it confusing and contradictory when the teachers who wanted them to write with their own voices criticized their word choice and gave them prescriptive advice about how to organize their papers. Diana, a psychology major, told us, for example, that the creative language with lots of examples and metaphors that was valued by her teachers in Columbia wasn’t working for her in the US.

“Here it’s very structured and very organized and sometimes I think that too much structure maybe doesn’t allow students to really think because you have follow [the structure] and sometimes I feel like, stop it, I want to do something else but I can’t because ... here it’s very, very specific.”

Diana, international student from Columbia

And Malak, a Saudi student, explained,

“In Arabic, it’s better to be a little bit complicated ... it gives value to your writing, people have to think about it. Writing is good when you use words to draw a picture for the reader for a complex, not a simple, meaning. You must not be simple or say something in a straightforward way. I think it’s the opposite with English where it’s better to have a simple structure.”

Malak, international student from Saudi Arabia

While these observations will sound familiar to many of you interested in contrastive rhetoric, what’s compelling to me is the implicit suggestion that the concise language and tight organization typically expected in standard academic English do not allow the richness of other voices and ways of thinking and writing to be heard. Although these students may not realize it, I hear them echoing the very arguments many of us in composition studies are making about valuing diverse Englishes and the need to assume a translanguing mindset when we teach and evaluate writing.

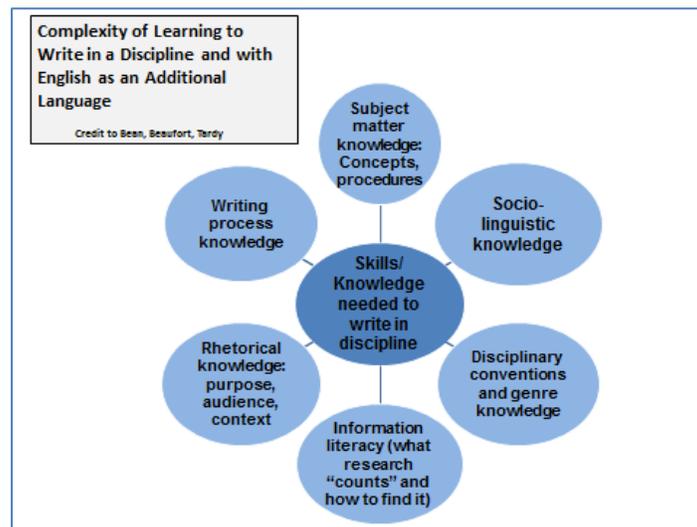
By studying these writers in contexts outside of the U.S., we might come closer to understanding how they are processing the “rules” they’re being taught at the same time that they’re also weighing the rightness of these rules for the contexts in which they’re writing.

At the same time, however, I think most undergraduates, whether English is their first or an additional language, haven’t yet realized that the voices, formats, and conventions the teachers expect them to use are very much bound up with ways of researching and writing in the fields the students are entering. For example, here’s what Mike, an English L1 student focus group participant for the *Engaged Writers/Dynamic Disciplines* research, had to say: “I think a lot of teachers look at good writing sort of based on their own writing, so I get a different impression from teacher to teacher.”

Mike’s right--teachers do have different ideas about good writing based on how they write. Yet many teachers seem to forget how long it took them to learn to write in the appropriate voices and conventions for their fields. Instead, the teachers repeat what they’d been told as writers, that good writing is good writing no matter what the task or context.

Many faculty also think that students should have learned to write once and for all at some earlier point in their education before they’ve gotten to that teacher’s class. While students do gain valuable writing knowledge and experience in their composition or EAP courses, their development as writers doesn’t end there, as we know and many teachers across the curriculum also realize. It takes time, practice, and experience to learn “all those little intangibles” that make up a writer’s voice in his or her discipline, as a bioscience professor told me.

Writing in disciplines diagram



But, besides time, practice, and experience writing, what else is involved in students learning to write in their disciplines? As you can see in the figure on the screen and **on your handout** in addition to the content of a course, student writers need to learn the expected purposes,

audiences, formats (genres), conventions, styles, and voices expected in the discipline, along with composing and research processes specific to the field.

A daunting task for any student but especially so for second language writers, who, as you well know, face additional cultural and sociolinguistic challenges. Not only is their writing process more constrained as they search for the correct words and phrasing, they also must acquire the *strategic competence* to evaluate the writing task and the intended audience, decide how to respond, and then retrieve and organize all of the appropriate elements—including voice and style—to carry out the task.

This list of the writing knowledge that must be acquired reminds us that writing is much more than words on the page. When we tutor—or teach—writing, we are always also working with a real writer for whom the act of writing is deeply personal even if the voice on the page is not.

Consider, then, the valuable contributions you can make to the relatively small body of research we have on how English language learners coming from so many different cultures, educational backgrounds, and rhetorical traditions acquire these skills and strategic competencies. We have much to learn about what writing knowledge and linguistic resources they draw on when they write across languages and cultures in their courses across the curriculum.

“Talking in the Middle”
The Many Roles a Writing Tutor Plays

- encouraging writer independence through collaborative talk
- assisting with the acquisition of strategic knowledge about writing and higher/lower order concerns
- interpreting the meaning of writing terminology and teachers’ expectations
- assisting with affective concerns by listening with empathy and understanding

We also have much to learn about the vital role that tutors in your centers play when they talk in the middle between teachers and English L2 student writers. In her 1986 article that’s become a staple of tutor training in U.S. writing centers, Muriel Harris describes tutors’ roles as encouraging writer independence through collaborative talk, assisting with the acquisition of strategic knowledge about writing, interpreting the meaning of writing terminology and teachers’ expectations, and assisting with affective concerns by listening with empathy and understanding.

While the validity of these roles has been challenged by some second language writing center scholars, who point to the need for much more directive and authoritative approaches, I could see, for example, when I read Eleftheriou’s study on tutors’ and tutees’ perceptions of the effectiveness of the approaches being used in their sessions, that the tutees valued “egalitarian

peer-tutoring relationships” and also believed that they’d learned important transferrable writing skills.

Similarly, when it comes to teaching writing in the Gulf region, Muhammad M. Abdel Latif’s review of 80 research studies for “What Do We Know and What Do We Need to Know about Arab Gulf EFL/ESL Students’ Writing?” indicates that Arab student generally perform better with group feedback and when they work collaboratively. Their writing problems, he finds, are caused not just by a lack of experience with writing and “interference at the linguistic, cultural, and rhetorical levels,” but by poor instructional and feedback practices, which most frequently involved only attention to correcting surface errors. In his recommendations for future research, he calls for studies of topics concerning the “affective variables” related to students’ English writing and development as writers.

Considering the affective, interpretive, and collaborative roles tutors play and the ways in which they help students acquire the strategic competence to develop as writers, it’s not hard to see the need for research on what these roles look like in practice. Tutors also play the role of cultural mediators, as many writing center scholars suggest. They help English L2 writers mediate, for example, between their own experiences as writers and institutional assumptions about standard English and what makes writing acceptable. In this role, then, they can engage students in critical reflection on academic cultures at the same time that they try to make these cultures more accessible to them.

Along with all of these roles, tutors can be enlisted as co-inquirers in researching local writing, teaching, and tutoring practices. There is much to learn and much to contribute to global conversations around world Englishes and “standard” English, multicultural identities and written voices, what it means to be original and think critically in different academic cultures, and how the English L2 students, tutors, and teachers at the writing sites in which you work make sense of all of these.

As I was preparing this talk, I was reminded of a 1995 article by three African scholars from different countries and university systems who had gone to the UK for advanced studies in composition, where they read, almost exclusively, theory and research from U.S. contexts. In “Importing Composition: Teaching and Researching Academic Writing Beyond North America,” they ask us to imagine what, from the world of composition, we would pack in a small box that would fit under an airline seat for them to take back to their countries. What is essential from the composition enterprise, they asked, and what would you expect us to do with what you packed? And what would you expect in return?

I want to change their questions a bit and turn them around to ask: Of the North American writing center pedagogies and practices you’ve carried here, what have you adapted and changed to fit your local contexts? And what would you pack in a small suitcase that I can carry back with me? What will you expect U.S. writing scholars and practitioners to do with what you’ve packed? And what will you expect from us in return?

I’ve suggested several times in this talk that I believe your experiential and data-rich investigations can have far-reaching implications outside of your local contexts in helping other

practitioners and scholars understand what it's like to write, tutor, and teach writing in English in the culturally and linguistically rich environments in which you work. Your research also helps us to understand the academic identities your student writers are negotiating every day fit into wider global understandings of the Englishes being practiced by speakers and writers around the world.

As LeFort and others have suggested, you can share your research locally on the MENAWCA website. Here are some venues where you might consider disseminating your work more broadly.

Some venues for sharing your work:

MENAWCA: Middle East - North Africa Writing Centers Alliance
<http://menawca.org/12.htm>
A network of writing center directors, employees, tutors and others interested in supporting student writing in the Arab world

International Exchanges on the Study of Writing
<http://wac.colostate.edu/books/international.cfm>
Publishes book-length manuscripts that address worldwide perspectives on writing, writers, teaching with writing, and scholarly writing practices, specifically those that draw on scholarship across national and disciplinary borders to challenge parochial understandings of all of the above.

ATD: Across the Disciplines
<http://wac.colostate.edu/atd/>
Online refereed journal that publishes articles relevant to writing and writing pedagogy internationally in all their intellectual, political, social, and technological complexity.

REx: Research Exchange
<http://researchexchange.colostate.edu/>
Designed to recognize local, national, and international writing researchers by collecting and publishing information about the research studies they've conducted.

Committee on Globalization of Postsecondary Writing Instruction and Research
<http://www.ncte.org/cccc/committees/globalization>
Among its charges are the following: Establish global partnerships and gather information about the growth of postsecondary writing education in different regions of the world.

And, finally, I want to let Sandarshi, the Sri Lankan graduate student I've quoted earlier, have the last word:

I grew up learning in many languages so I don't recall distinctly there's a particular day or event that I learned to write in English. It just happened simultaneously. And now it's interwoven with all the languages I speak.

And, if I didn't have a second or third language, I wouldn't read all the other things written in my different languages and be able to understand. Every single language you know, how much more richer your experiences are. And how much it has nourished my writing and thinking.

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