2013

What is ESL?

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INTRODUCTION: ONE POPULATION OR MANY?

Much has been said about the diversity in the population we often refer to as *ESL students*. Although the bulk of the research on second-language writing in the 1980s and 90s was concerned mostly with international students with visas to study in the US, significant attention in the last decade has been paid to an important distinction between international students and US-resident learners of English. Several books have been written about resident linguistic minority students (Harklau, Losey, and Siegal; Ferris; Kanno and Harklau; Roberge, Siegal, and Harklau) and the ways in which their needs as writers differ from the needs of international students (see also Reid; Matsuda and Matsuda). Several special issues of the *Journal of Second Language Writing* have been devoted to early childhood and adolescent second-language writing as well, and disciplinary links have been made in recent years with bilingual education (Edelsky and Shuck). In fact, the complexity that is the ESL population is so rich and intricate that I am tempted to use scare quotes every time I use the word *population*. After all, many multilingual learners of English have far more in common with native English speakers/writers than they do with other learners of English.[1] For now, however, I'll frame this paper with a summary of who multilingual students are. We're talking about:

- International students (holding visas to study in the US) who studied English but never used it for real communication.
- International students who studied in an intensive English program in the US or another English-dominant country.

- International students who spoke English at home or school or work in their native countries (one prominent example, Min-Zhan Lu, has written poignantly about her family's use of English at home before and during the Cultural Revolution in China; Suresh A. Canagarajah [*Resisting*] has painted a complex picture of the use of—and resistance to— English in Sri Lanka).
- Transnational students who spend significant educational time in two or more countries.
- US-born students who speak a language other than (more often, in addition to) English at home and might be English-dominant, L1-dominant, or fully bilingual.
- Immigrants who came to the US as children or teens (with varying degrees of proficiency in English and in their parents' languages, and varying degrees of literacy in any language).
- Adult immigrants (with similarly varying language and literacy expertise).
- Refugees—quite different in some critical ways from immigrants—who used or studied English in at least one other country before arriving in the US—for example:
  - ° many of Boise State University's Nepali refugee students attended English-medium schools in Bhutan, Nepal, or India;
  - ° some refugees from Iraq may have been interpreters for the US military before being displaced (but had little to no opportunity to develop advanced English literacy);
  - ° some refugees from Sudan or Somalia fled to Kenya, where English is a primary public language;
  - ° some refugees from Bosnia and Albania lived in Germany for some time and attained fairly high levels of English in public schools there.
- Refugees who had never used or studied English at all before coming to this country.
- Refugees whose first languages aren't written.
- Students who feel very strongly that they're English learners and are thankful for ESL programs.
- Students who feel they've "graduated" from ESL programs.
- Us (I'm not waxing metaphorical here—it's important to remember that many WPAs are also L2 users of English) .

No single label that has been used to describe this "population" can encompass all of the students we're talking about. We have *ELL*

(English language learner), *ESOL* (English for speakers of other languages, which is more appropriate for naming programs than naming students), *multilingual, bilingual, ESL, nonnative speaker, Generation 1.5, EAL* (English as an additional language), *second-language* (L2) *writer, English learner,* and even more. Students differ from each other along several dimensions with respect to English proficiency, none of them deterministic. Primary factors in students' acquisition of English include age upon arrival in the US, differential support for first-language literacy, differential access to educational opportunities, more or fewer opportunities to communicate with others in multiple languages in and out of school, previous experiences with English outside the US, and sociopolitical relations between learners and native speakers.

And that's only if we focus on *language* identities.

Add to that all of the ways monolingual native English-speaking students differ from each other—interests, political persuasions, personalities, social groups, current work situations, family obligations. What about students' identities *as* students? What kinds of educational and career aspirations do they have? All of this richness disappears when we conceive of multilingual students as primarily the sum of their troubles with English.

When answering the question "What Is ESL?" then, we must ask not just who ESL students are but also what the *consequences* are of naming, identifying, dividing students by language background. Then we must also ask this: What are the consequences of *not* naming, identifying, dividing students by language background? Why not take the common stance of focusing only on differences at an individual level? Why do we need to label anyone? Can't we create programs that work for all students without worrying about whether they're multilingual or monolingual?

While it's tempting to think that it doesn't matter what someone's native language is, doing so does not serve all students equally and effectively. There are still significant differences between native and nonnative English speakers in writing processes, appropriate placement options, instructional choices, and professional development issues that writing program faculty and administrators should take into account. Ignoring such differences almost always results in a privileging of native English writers—the unspoken norm—and an erasing of the needs of all multilingual writers but those who are perfectly or nearly fluent in English. We should, then, pay attention to all of the

ways in which composition has tacitly imagined itself as serving mono-
lingual, English-speaking students (Horner and Trimbur; Matsuda,
"Myth") and replace this monolingual norm with a multilingual one
that accounts for such vast linguistic diversity from the start.

From this multilingual perspective, we can talk about what kinds
of strategies WPAs can use to make sure the needs of multilingual
and monolingual students alike are being met. The endless variation
in the population that we've historically called "ESL" was one of the
most important reasons why I named the programs that I developed at
Boise State "English Language Support Programs." Rather than label
students (inaccurately or at least in ways that students don't use to
describe themselves), I wanted the name of the program to describe
what we *do*.

That's really the crux of what "ESL" is. "ESL" is not a clearly identi-
fiable group of students who have similar characteristics. Nor is it a list
of common grammar "troublespots" or exotic rhetorical conventions.
It's a lens through which we can see our work. It's a set of practices—
things we *do*—that increase educational opportunities and success for
all students, regardless of language background.

I urge WPAs, then, to think first from a multilingual perspective,
rather than imagining a monolingual population from the start and
only later realizing that they need to consider how their placement
procedures, curricula, faculty development avenues and topics, and
even scheduling decisions will have an impact on multilingual stu-
dents. If we imagine multilingual classrooms as the norm, our whole
framework shifts.

In my 2006 WPA article, I described two primary directions for
providing English language support for multilingual writers, namely,
educating students (providing tutoring and cross-cultural course op-
tions) and *educating faculty* (workshops, cross-cultural teaching op-
portunities, and individual consulting). What I neglected to highlight
then was the need for partnerships across the institution (and indeed,
across institutions). As Coordinator of English Language Support Pro-
grams, I have an administrative role separate from that of our director
of first-year composition. That need for relationship-building between
academic and administrative units has become especially urgent as the
number of international students at our university has grown dramati-
cally and has included more students with lower English proficiency
levels than we had seen before. You know the story: Administrators are

excited about the revenue that full-tuition-paying international students bring and are compensating for lower enrollments among domestic students by recruiting heavily abroad. To meet the challenges brought on by these increasing numbers, my colleagues in First-Year Writing, English Language Support, Admissions, and other campus units have worked more collaboratively than ever to develop creative solutions. Most transformative among them, although perhaps not terribly creative, has been a close structural relationship between our First-Year Writing Program office (Director, Associate Director, and Administrative Assistant) and the English Language Support Programs office (Coordinator and Assistant Coordinator). We work together to provide opportunities for faculty development, choose and schedule instructors for cross-cultural sections of first-year writing, strategize about other curricular structures that serve multilingual students most effectively, offer informed advice to multilingual students, and make sure that placement procedures account for those students' needs. We have also worked together with the registrar's office, Advising and Academic Enhancement, the (non-credit) Intensive English Program, and International Student Services to discuss how best to reach as many students in need of language support as we can. Although our particular challenges might have shifted, the lens through which I see these challenges remains the same.

Diversity of Students, Diversity of Options

What can language support look like? Writing programs come in lots of shapes and sizes, of course, and can address the needs of such an enormously diverse population in a variety of ways. Before I focus on two initiatives that I feel are particularly important, I would like to point out that the common curricular structure of offering parallel sequences of first-year composition (FYC)—one "mainstream" sequence and one sequence for multilingual students, which meets the English composition requirement—provides an important opportunity for students to self-identify, as long as the placement process is equitable (see below; see also Royer and Gilles, this volume) and students have the option to choose which sequence they want to be in.

I would like to highlight here a less common approach: cross-cultural classes (see also Shuck). Cross-cultural classes provide multilingual students with opportunities to be integrated into the regular

curriculum while getting instructional support from an instructor who is prepared to work with multilingual students (Matsuda and Silva). At Boise State, we have set aside seats in several sections of FYC and closely monitored enrollments in an attempt to have at least a 50:50 ratio of nonnative to native English speakers. More and more instructors are now requesting these classes, hoping to encourage cross-cultural interactions and expand their pedagogical repertoires. Cross-cultural curricula are not limited to composition courses. Other departments on campus, including communication, foundational studies (an integrated general education program), literacy, theatre arts, and math have begun offering either multilingual-only or cross-cultural sections of their first-year courses as well.

No matter which departments offer cross-cultural sections, the academic landscape shifts significantly when such classes are available and when the pedagogies in those classes systematically consider the wide-ranging linguistic and cultural backgrounds of the students. No longer is the focus on English deficiency; suddenly, the cross-cultural courses are the cool ones. I now teach a first-year linguistics class, Language in Human Life, which in its current iteration has sixteen English learners and seven native English speakers in it (see discussion of learning community, below). On the first day, there were an additional five *native* English speakers sitting in, hoping for permission to enroll. All twenty-three enrolled in the class have the chance to reflect on the nature of language, drawing on knowledge right there in the room from seventeen languages besides English. They have internalized the value of language diversity, as Canagarajah (*Critical*) has advocated, embracing difference as a resource.

In addition to cross-cultural classes, Boise State has recently implemented a "fast-track" learning community for multilingual students, blending a linked-course model for supporting ESL students and a studio model for mainstreaming developmental writers (Adams, Miller and Roberts; Mlynarczyk and Babbit; Murie and Fitzpatrick; Rodby and Fox; Smoke). Mainstreaming students in such programs avoids stigmatization, decreases time to degree, fosters a sense of community, and offers extra support for the students who need it. Many of our new international students in the last year or two place into the lowest of three levels of ESL writing and do not have nearly the vocabulary or grammatical repertoire to handle the required FYC course (English 101). The reading and writing tasks even in the "regular" develop-

mental writing course are simply overwhelming for them. That three-level ESL sequence still exists as an option, and students get credit for it (a key principle—see Silva, and the "CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers"), but many students want to speed up their entry into FYC. The pilot learning community links three credit-bearing courses as corequisites, with the three instructors meeting periodically and sharing assignments and readings:

- Academic English Writing for Speakers of Other Languages, Level III (after which students who pass will enroll in English 101);
- Language in Human Life (a cross-cultural, requirement-fulfilling course);
- and a Multilingual Writers' Studio—which assists students with the reading and writing they are doing in the other two courses.

The exception to our rule that students must co-enroll in all three is that Language in Human Life also has a few seats available to native English speakers.

This learning community model is not new, but it was the urgency of providing these newer, less proficient students with manageable courses that led me to partner with the multiple offices needed to make it happen: the Intensive English Program, the First-Year Writing Program, Advising and Academic Enhancement, the registrar's office, International Student Services, and the Testing Center. Such linkages require forging partnerships across campus, but don't require additional funding. Two of the courses already existed, and the studio simply replaced one section of the Level 1 ESL course, which students are trying to avoid, anyway. With the recent push to eliminate "remediation," I believe we will have support in funding this program in a sustainable way if we can demonstrate its success. I have no doubt that we can.

It is important to be aware that providing a variety of course options is not sufficient for supporting multilingual students. We offer one-on-one tutoring, which requires a knowledgeable faculty/staff member to coordinate the program, and a pool of knowledgeable, paid tutors (ours are undergraduates who have demonstrated patience, cultural sensitivity, and some education in applied linguistics). This support is in addition to the outstanding work that our writing center directors do to educate their consultants on second-language issues; they have built such preparation into their tutor training course. We

have also partnered with several departments and units to place a peer tutor or teaching assistant in several courses, whose work can benefit both native and nonnative English speakers. This is an important reminder that what starts out as an ESL strategy might just become a regular form of support for all students.

LINGUISTICALLY INCLUSIVE PLACEMENT

Once multiple curricular options are in place for multilingual English learners, the procedures used for placement should have a mechanism for identifying English learners (including self-identification), primarily to avoid the too-common phenomenon of placing highly literate international students into developmental writing courses because of their performance on a native speaker-oriented test like Compass or ACCUPLACER or the SAT. This is tricky, though. International students are an identifiable population, and the majority of them are indeed second-language learners of English. The simplistic path is to rely on the office of international admissions to funnel all of the international students into an ESL track. However, the majority of the English learners we have on campus are not in fact international students (and not all international students are L2 learners of English). So a placement process whose primary means of identifying English learners is to divide the resident students from the international students is highly likely to be inaccurate at best and exclusionary at worst. Since we cannot and should not segregate multilingual learners, then, from the "mainstream" population, placement procedures have to take them into account.

If your institution has a directed self-placement process (see Royer and Gilles, this volume), advisors or online resources need to have enough information to guide students toward appropriate options such as the learning community, ESOL testing, and cross-cultural courses. Portfolio placement, for those institutions lucky enough to be able to offer it, is rarely feasible for multilingual students, some of whom came to the US as adults and do not have writing samples to submit, and some of whom are international students whose test-based educational systems did not ask them to produce sustained writing of any kind. For in-house or collaboratively developed direct writing assessments, writing prompts (this includes passages or articles students are asked to respond to) should account for a variety of cultural backgrounds.

That requires having faculty with experience working with second-language writers play a role in at least offering feedback on prompts. As for evaluating placement essays, it is quite possible to have readers learn how to evaluate the writing of English learners and to have scoring rubrics that recognize a wide range of ESOL proficiencies. This is one way to disrupt the practice of sending all papers with evidence of second-language errors off to an ESL Department, absolving WPAs of the responsibility for developing a linguistically sensitive set of placement practices.

Then there's mandated standardized testing—the use of ACC-UPLACER, Compass, SAT scores, and the like. As we all know, this is a persistent (and, in many places, intensifying) challenge. What does it mean for English learners? This is one time when some degree of "segregating" can actually be the more equitable option, allowing us to advocate at least for some kind of procedure that was designed for English learners. Few administrators would argue that second-language differences must be completely ignored and that ESL students must take exactly the same tests as native English speakers. However, because pressure still exists from administrators and state-level boards to use standardized tests, a lead faculty member or task force can arm themselves with research in second-language writing assessment practices (Crusan) and advocate for alternatives to those tests. Many of the same arguments apply when WPAs advocate for ethical placement practices for native English speakers, but for nonnative English speakers, it is particularly important to highlight the differences in language acquisition processes, literacy backgrounds, and test-taking experience, all of which can dramatically affect placement outcomes.

FACULTY DEVELOPMENT

In their chapter, "What Is Faculty Development?" in this volume, Carol Rutz and Stephen Wilhoit outline a number of forms of faculty development, which I won't repeat here. The question is: How do you guide faculty in working with multilingual writers if you don't feel like you have the knowledge to do so effectively? Does this mean that you, the WPA, have to be a second-language specialist? Well, yes and no. We should educate ourselves on as many aspects of second-language writing as we can, of course. Paul Kei Matsuda ("Let's Face It") urges WPAs to implement policies and pedagogies that "embrace the pres-

ence and needs of second-language writers" (159). One way to do that is to rely on such expertise that might be in your midst already. Writing faculty across the country are among the most creative, dedicated professionals that I personally have ever had the privilege to know. They know things. Even better, they're good at teaching and can share their wisdom with even the most inexperienced (or experienced) WPAs.

Let me give you an example of a recent all-day "TESOL Boot Camp" that Julie Geist Drew, my English Language Support partner, and I facilitated. The name was the brainchild of an adjunct faculty member who teaches developmental writing and, even after a four-part series of discussions of second-language writing, still lacked confidence about working with the ever-growing number of international students who are taking her classes. So we held an all-day workshop at the end of the semester. Eighteen faculty showed up, suggesting that their desire for TESOL-related education is urgent. We had asked workshop-goers to bring assignments that they wanted to revise for a multilingual classroom, and then, as participants talked about their own assignments, it became clear that they were teaching each other, and Julie and I didn't have to do much except type. The TESOL suggestions were actually developed by the "non-experts" in the room.

You can also avail yourself of resources for helping yourself as well as the faculty you work with develop L2 pedagogies. Bringing in outside specialists, if you have the resources, or developing TESOL inquiry groups can be great ways of providing opportunities for developing faculty knowledge about how to teach in multilingual classrooms without your having to be the expert. Build bridges with ESL departments or programs. Put together task forces with members of developmental studies departments, centers for teaching and learning, intensive English programs, and other units on campus. Yes, these things take time; but ultimately, this relationship-building can be one of the most important things you can do to change the landscape for multilingual writers.

CONCLUSION

In their article on the Accelerated Learning Program, Peter Adams, Sarah Gearhart, Robert Miller, and Anne Loomis Roberts describe their developmental courses as "more path than gate" (51). As we try to come up with more and better ways of supporting multilingual stu-

dents, I often feel torn between wanting to widen and even out the path, on one hand, and building a better gate, on the other. Ideally, we could offer courses across the curriculum in multiple languages, allowing students to develop academic knowledge and literacy in languages other than English. Until then, we have to make sure we provide access to the curriculum for the students we have admitted. That's the question: Do we limit admission to students who have achieved higher levels of English? How high is high enough? How is high enough determined? Are we prepared to rely solely on a single test score for determining whether a student's English is ready for college work? What if we used a more multifaceted means of determining English proficiency—one that seemed fair and valid and reliable? Where would the line be between ready and not ready? We've heard many administrators' and even legislators' takes on "college readiness" as they urge us to keep "remedial" courses out of the university, but they're not usually talking about English language learners, especially because recruiting more international students is apparently so lucrative for the institution. Do the arguments change if we're no longer imagining native speakers of English? What if we're not talking about international students but rather immigrant and refugee English learners on financial aid? Do the arguments change further?

These questions are complex and difficult to answer. As Coordinator of English Language Support Programs, I'm asking them all the time. Fortunately, I'm no longer the "ESL person" (Shuck) charged with solving them all. Also fortunately, the pressure that many US institutions are feeling to provide support for much larger numbers of multilingual students has had some exciting outcomes. One of those is that it's not just ESL specialists thinking about these questions; WPAs are, too. Working together, we might be able to carve out smoother, wider paths, after all.

NOTE

1. My impulse is also to broaden our discussion to include writing program administration in any country and with languages other than English. If we see our work as translingual, an approach that Canagarajah and others (*Literacy*) have drawn attention to, then we should not limit ourselves to English. However, for simplicity's sake (keeping in mind whose interests such simplicity serves), I am after all going to use the United States as the setting and English as the language in question.

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