
Speaking of Writing: International and Immigrant Students Share their Experiences at a Northern Minnesota University

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I NTRODUCTION

In my first two years teaching freshman composition at the University of Minnesota Duluth (UMD) I have felt inadequate teaching English Language Learners (ELL)¹ students in my classes and in the Writing Workshop, where I tutor with six other graduate teaching assistants. At least a third of the students who visit the Workshop struggle with English and I often wonder if my syntactical cues and grammar exercises do any good.

In the next few years it is likely that the number of non-native English speaking students in Minnesota colleges and universities will rise significantly. According to U.S. census data, in the last ten years Minnesota's foreign-born population more than doubled from 110,000 to 240,000. With the highest number of Somali refugees in the U.S., Minnesota is also home to more than 70,000 Hmong. Compared to the median age of 35 for the entire Minnesota population, the median age of Hmong is 17, which indicates that a large number of Hmong youth will soon enter the state's colleges and universities. With the elimination of the General College at the University of Minnesota's Twin Cities campus, more urban immigrant students will apply to community colleges, the MSU state university schools and the smaller UM schools, like Duluth. In addition, while UM strives to become one of the world's leading research institutions, it will

likely boost its recruitment of talented scholars from overseas.

Despite these state-wide trends, at this time international and immigrant students still represent a linguistic minority² at UMD. At this time UMD does not offer any ESL sections of freshman composition, though it does provide a few elective remedial courses for students who may struggle with written English. At UMD adjunct faculty and graduate assistants teach this required entry-level course, and less than 5% of the instructor pool possesses any ESL training or certification, factors that almost make UMD resemble how P.K. Matsuda (2003) describes universities in the 1950s, when ELL students were either placed into mainstream writing courses with no linguistic support, or automatically lumped with basic writers in remedial sub-freshman courses (p. 782).

The University administration is very aware that departments need to ratchet up their services for Minnesota's new populations, but, as any seasoned teacher knows, talk of top-down policy changes will not help one's students today. When I began this study in January of 2006 I entered it with two questions and two assumptions. First, I wanted to know how ELL students are faring now in the current system, and second, what we as non-ESL composition instructors can do to support minority ELL students in our mainstream classrooms.

My first assumption was that there exist vast differences between international and immigrant students. To begin with, international students are much easier to identify since they must submit their Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores when they apply to the university. These students often come to study in the United States as fluent writers in their native language(s), and plan to return to their home country once they accomplish their educational goals. On the other hand, students who immigrated to the U.S. before they finished high school do not take the TOEFL; they may simply submit their ACT scores. Many immigrant students that participated in this study learned to speak English as early as Kindergarten, speak without an accent, and consider themselves as "American" as the next student.

UMD does provide tutoring and advisement for in-

coming ELL students, but as one director from the Multicultural Center said, identifying first-generation immigrant students is particularly difficult when these students do not label themselves as “ESL.” She said that at the beginning of each semester she combs through each application of new students of color. She assumes that those with ACT verbal scores lower than nineteen are ELLs, and she advises them to acquire additional tutoring and instruction before they register for freshman composition. She can only make recommendations, and frequently, she said, students do not have room for more electives.

My second assumption was that English Language Learners could tell us college writing instructors a lot about how they learn and what we can do to help them.

Methodology

In this study, I sought to understand the writing experiences of UMD’s international and immigrant students³ and to gather their insights and recommendations on how the University can best address their needs in college writing. My methodology is based on in-depth phenomenological, qualitative interviewing as a “basic mode of inquiry” (Seidman, 1998 p. 2). Since I had only six weeks to complete this project, I was not able to go as “in-depth” as Seidman’s model of three successive interviews allows. Instead, I met with volunteer participants for one interview, which lasted from fifteen minutes to an hour. I asked participants to sign a consent form, pick a pseudonym, and respond to nine open-ended questions:

1. What is your first language and what has writing in your first language been like for you in the past?
2. What has writing in English been like for you in the past (before you started college)?
3. What is writing in English like for you now, in college?
4. Have you participated in peer revision workshops in a writing class (where you trade papers with another classmate)? If so, please describe that experience.
5. Have you gone to any of UMD’s tutoring centers

to get help with writing? If so, please describe that experience.

6. What are your plans after college and how does writing in English play a role in those plans?

7. Do you think college writing instructors should adapt any part of the course for students whose first language is not English? If so, what should they do?

8. Is there anything specific that you would like the composition department administration and instructors to know about your writing experiences here at UMD?

9. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

For Internal Review Board (IRB) exemption status I took an online CITI course on the protection of human research subjects, and I had to demonstrate that my interview questions would not solicit personal information. Of course, writing experiences are not divorced from “real life;” they reflect our self-identity, our relationships with family and peers, and our attitudes about learning and literacy. “Writing,” as Donald Murray writes, “is not superficial to the intellectual life but central to it; writing is one of the most disciplined ways of making meaning” (2004, p. 3). Speaking about writing adds another layer of self-discovery to this kind of methodology, which is grounded in Vygotsky’s view that the words one chooses to convey experience reveal a model of the speaker’s consciousness (1987, pp. 236-237). In this way, qualitative interviewing seeks to understand that consciousness in order to grasp the complex abstractions of social and educational issues (Seidman 1).

Access to Participants

Often, finding volunteer participants is the most challenging part of this kind of research. I knew three of the participants before the interviews; the others I met through “gatekeepers,” the people within an institution who hold either legitimate authority or “moral suasion” (Seidman, 1998, p. 39). Without their help, I never would have been able to complete this project. They also shared their perspectives on the issues surrounding services for ELL students at UMD.

Initially, the Director of Asian Student Services did not respond to my two e-mail queries. Instead of taking silence as an answer I walked into his office and introduced myself. He admitted that he remembered my name, and then paused. I reminded him what I had asked before: I wanted his advice on how I could interest Hmong students in participating in the study. He reflected that he often wonders if the numerous researchers who contact him for leads to Hmong students have a genuine interest in improving the lives of the students, or if they simply want to “suck up their wisdom like a vacuum.”

I admit that his comment forced me to reconsider my intentions. I have been drawn to this subject because of my background working with immigrant populations in San Francisco. I missed them as individuals and the sense of purpose I had as an advocate. I also recognized the arrogance of wanting to give “under-represented people” a voice, which, in turn, can deny their right to self-determination. Nonetheless, I began to think that doing nothing would be worse. For all of these reasons I accepted my responsibility to convey participants’ responses with accuracy and to share my findings with those who are in the position to influence change. If I don’t do these things, my research *will* remain within “a vacuum.”

The Participants

Fifteen undergraduate students participated in the study. Two-thirds indicated that they plan to pursue graduate and/or professional degrees after they complete their bachelor’s. Four were male and eleven were female. At the MCTE Spring Conference in Rochester an educator who had done similar research with immigrant students said that most of his participants were male. Obviously, we concluded, potential participants felt more comfortable being interviewed by someone of their gender, particularly for those who come from cultures that reinforce traditional gender roles and segregation. Of those fifteen, five were international students who planned to return to their home countries in the near future. Of the ten permanent U.S. residents (who were either first or second-generation immigrants), only two said they could read and/or write in their native language(s).

The Process

The themes did not emerge from the interviews in a linear way. Some participants responded to the questions with short, succinct sentences while others told their life stories. To formulate follow-up questions I listened carefully to the stress participants put on certain words, to the places they laughed, or the words they repeated.⁴ Sometimes I asked relevant follow-up questions, but other times I didn't hear what a participant *really* said until I was transcribing. In fact, as my research advisor Linda Miller Cleary attests from doing this kind of research in collaboration, two researchers will hear different themes emerge from the same narrative. In this way, I acknowledge the inherent subjectivity of my presentation. I will provide connections between the narratives, refer to what other researchers have published about the issues raised, and summarize some recurring responses, but, overall, I want to allow the participants to speak for themselves.⁵

The Interviews

I identified five categories to describe certain variables that may determine ELL student success in college writing: motivation (both instrumental and integrative); preparation (high school and remedial courses); access to on-campus support (tutors, instructors, and peers); access to off-campus support (friends and family); and their ability to adapt to academic discourse and rhetoric. By no means complete, this list does begin to form a three-dimensional model of what influences student learning.

Motivation

Initially, I expected that I could draw a clear line between international and immigrant students based on Gardner and Lambert's (1972) instrumental and integrative motivation model. According to their scheme, instrumental motivation pushes one to learn the target language to accomplish some other goal; while integrative motivation pushes one to adopt the target language's discourse community. Of course in real life such categories seem too reductive to describe the complex factors that influence motivation.

However, for the most part, I did find that many in-

ternational students learn to speak and write English to serve clearly articulated goals. Andre plans to work in the U.S. for a few years before he returns to his native Kazakhstan:

Primarily I chose engineering because I saw that it wouldn't require that much writing but I was wrong. Since I am going to pursue career as an engineer and actually write reports (and write in general), it requires at least ten percent of what I am going to do. For example, if you look at job requirements, they always require writing skills, so I guess it's very important.

Andre said his abilities to write in English will add to his valuable experiences here designing mobile heart monitor machines.

Audrey and Karen, who both play on the UMD women's hockey team, said that they will survive without English when they return to Montreal, but as bilinguals they will have an edge in the Canadian job market. Suzannah does not foresee having to write in English when she returns to Switzerland, but she expects that knowing how to read the science literature in English will give her an advantage in graduate school.

Nicole, also on the women's hockey team, said: "I want to come back to the U.S. and teach. As a teacher I will have to write in many different forms. I will always stay in touch with many friends that I made who speak English." Nicole's response combines career (instrumental) and relationship (integrative) goals.

For many first generation immigrants, mastering English serves both integrative and instrumental purposes. Vang, a Political Science major who was born in a Hmong refugee camp in Thailand, described how he played a key role in his family after they arrived in the United States:

For me, growing up, it was really on myself to learn the language to help my parents out. When you're the oldest son you are the translator of the family. It's on me to translate for my mom, for my dad, when we're going to the store, to the car shop, whatever,

it was on me to learn it. So learning, reading, writing in English...I won't say it was easy, but I enjoyed it because I knew I could use it.

Vang said he has always done well in English classes, plans to go to law school, and even writes for creative expression: "I do a lot, just poems and rhyming stuff... if I need to just get something out, I write."

Like Vang, Coco said she has both instrumental and integrative motivations to write:

I've always had good writing experiences: it's always been easy for me. I do like it, I do enjoy it. I journal, whenever I get a chance. I do love to, that's the best form of writing for me, that's what I enjoy the most. [In my upper division comp class] we're doing resumes and cover letters, and I enjoy that, and we're working on the I-Search paper, which I have never done before, which I am really excited to do because it's different.

Like Vang, Coco sees how writing will allow her to achieve her goals: she said she plans to serve in the Peace Corps and earn a Master's in Social Work.

Many Hmong participants said they lacked instrumental motivation to learn how to write in Hmong. For example, Xiong, a criminology major, voiced a common complaint: "My parents tried teaching us one or two summers ago, it's pretty hard. It's not hard, but we just don't have the time to learn it. We find it kind of useless to have it."

For immigrant participants who belong to large families and communities in the Twin Cities, the need to integrate into mainstream U.S. culture may be minimal. Instead, one learns English and attends college in order to support their family while they strive to maintain their cultural identity. Mohammad, a recent immigrant from Somalia who speaks perfect English (though he began to learn less than seven years ago), said that he knows many people in his community who have lived in Minneapolis for fifteen to twenty years and still cannot speak Eng-

lish. He said that once he realized that he wanted to provide for his family, his instrumental motivation led him to college:

I went to high school. I was here eight months, and I took an assessment test. I just took it and they said, 'You did well!' Because before I went to school, I was kind of going to the library getting those English cassettes where they teach you. I was learning a lot. One thing I found out, I always learn quick. So I went there and they took a test and they said, 'Oh, you did well! We'll put you in tenth grade,' and I said, 'That's fine.' I went to high school, and I was kind of motivated to go to school, and it was fun for me to do it because I didn't experience it before. I knew that to succeed here in the United States I must speak English.

Mohammad had a personal connection to the people who inspired him to learn: his father; his former teacher; and his high school teachers who elected him Student of the Year:

I went to school, I was [there] one year, and I was chosen Student of the Year. My teachers were saying 'Yeah, you are really good,' and that motivated me a lot. And they took a picture of me, and they put it in front, where they put the pictures of the students, and my picture was there until I graduated. That was really motivating me, every time I came to the door, it was looking at me.

His story reminds us that even the most focused and intelligent students need positive role models, and that a little public recognition can make a big impression. For most young immigrants, public schools provide their first exposure to mainstream U.S. culture and values and, the kind of support and feedback that they receive in high school can determine the course they will take after graduation (C. Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001).

Overall, the participants in this study described mostly instrumental motivations to become fluent in English and/or to

acquire college-level writing skills. Of course, for students like Vang and Coco who are completely fluent and integrated into American school culture, these instrumental and integrative categories seem irrelevant, especially when they experience an intrinsic motivation to write. To enhance both internal and external motivation, writing instructors should find ways to allow ELL students to articulate their goals for each semester (Kasper & Petrello, 1998). One method would be to ask students to write a self-addressed letter, collect it, and then return it to the students at the end of the semester to reflect on how well they met their goals.

Preparation for College Writing

Many immigrant participants had mixed feelings about their high school experiences. Pa, a senior majoring in elementary education, loved writing at her St. Paul high school:

Well, I had a lot fun because I took a lot of really nice classes like creative writing. It was like more of the teacher because I knew him for four years, and he inspired me. He was like, 'You can write about anything.'

I liked it because it wasn't really limited.

On the other hand, Pa felt anxious about her ability to write standard academic papers. She complained that high school didn't prepare her for college-level writing:

I don't remember focusing on grammar, and I kind of wished they did that in middle school or high school, so it made it really difficult. Because I was like, 'Really?' I never knew that this was that important until everyone was saying that and making all these marks on the paper. I think that would be helpful. [In high school] we were just reading literature, and doing creative writing. I don't know why they do that; it makes college writing more difficult.

For Coco, whose Minnesota high school taught grammar and the conventions of academic writing, college writing was easy:

I felt like I didn't struggle as much as I thought I would. I thought it would be com-

pletely different from high school, but in a lot of ways it was just writing. It was not too different I suppose. I took what I thought was a pretty simple class. I've always used MLA style. That's the only style I used, and then taking psychology classes I learned the APA. I used reference guides even in high school.

Though they never attended an American high school, a few of the international students felt confident that they received a more solid academic foundation in their native countries. Andre said:

I noted that freshmen who went to high school here, they don't know how to write. In every sentence they use a 'like,' like they speak. They write like they speak. So I guess I had an advantage on that.

Suzannah criticized mainstreaming in American public high schools:

It's just that my base education is so much better than people here, even in math; it is so much easier for me. If I tell Americans they get mad because they think I am conceited, but it's just that Swiss education, sorry, is so much better. When I went to school, kids that were going to a big college were separated. If I had to go to school that was not doing as well, it would be frustrating, but with the separating you can adapt your teaching. I feel in high schools here they just have some average, and the good ones don't want to do anything because it's too easy, and the other ones are frustrated, and there are two or three that actually learn anything.

In the European tracking system that Suzannah describes, low performing secondary students will never have the option of attending college. Similarly in the U.S., course prerequisites and a Darwinist attitude among departments also tend to preclude

low-performing students from entering difficult classes.

Currently, UMD provides only two college writing preparatory courses: one that is suited for international students who need more practice speaking and orienting to U.S. University culture; whereas, for students who attended high school in the U.S. and need more step-by-step writing instruction, a remedial course offered through “Supportive Services” is the only option. Nonetheless, as electives, many students who could benefit from these courses do not take them. Even more perplexing were the number of immigrant participants who said that it took at least several months before they knew about these classes, free tutors, advisors, and the Multicultural Center. This indicates that the University could do more to orient ELL students to these valuable on-campus resources by providing special tours or information sheets. In addition, composition instructors could play a key role in communicating this information.

On-Campus Support

Tutors

Currently there are three places at UMD where ELLs can receive tutoring: The Writing Workshop staffed by graduate teaching assistants; the Tutoring Center staffed by undergraduates; and the Multicultural Center, by special appointment. Participants indicated that they picked one place and remained faithful to it, meaning that the quality of advertising, outreach, and personal warmth exhibited by the tutors could largely determine the success (measured by number of returning students) of each respective facility.

Of course, participants appreciated the place that gave them the most explicit instruction. Mohamad said that the Tutoring Center really helped him:

I always wanted someone who could proof-read my paper.... Not only did they proof-read my paper, they taught *me* how to proof-read my paper. So now whenever I just write a paper, even for my class, my normal class, I have to proofread it, and proofread it, and

proofread it, and after I proofread it three times then I just give it to someone who is native-English to see to what I don't see.

Mohammad said that the tutors asked him to read his paper out loud to listen for errors or missing punctuation. I was glad to hear this technique worked for him: I used to do this with students until I read that ELLs do not have an "intuitive ear" for their second language (Harris & Silva, 1993). This may demonstrate that Mohammad has achieved a certain level of fluency, and, in fact, this "intuitive ear" seems to indicate language fluency in general, a phenomenon in which Stephen Krashen bases his "monitor hypothesis" (1982, p. 31).

Xiong agreed that he wanted to have someone proofread his papers:

You type up ten pages and they just read it, 'Do this, do that, don't put the comma there.' I never knew that the comma was supposed to separate things out, like two different ideas; it was just like one of the things I learned from them. Just simple stuff that you don't understand.

At the Writing Workshop we graduate assistants enforce a policy against proofreading student papers. We reason that if we proofread students' papers they will never learn how to do it themselves. Sara, a Somali pre-med student, expressed frustration about this policy:

They tell you, 'I'm not going to proofread your paper—I'm just going to help you.' But sometimes there are things you don't know—like commas. Sometimes you put something where they're not supposed to be placed. So if they cannot help you with like, they make it so hard for you, then you're going to wonder, 'Why did I come here?' Why, if they say it's help?

After listening to several complaints like this I began to wonder where and how the ELL student can learn proofreading techniques. I also wondered if our proofreading policy discourages some students from ever visiting the Workshop. Meanwhile,

Xiong thought the Workshop served only freshman, while another Hmong student said, “I was a little bit too scared to go there.” I understand why a student may feel like a cat in a roomful of rocking chairs once she steps into the Writing Workshop: what could be more intimidating to someone who feels insecure about her grammar skills than asking for help from a stressed-out English graduate student? Any negative signal, such as “I won’t proofread your paper” will indicate that she has come to the wrong place.

This indicates that the no-proofreading policy should not be made explicit. Instead, tutors could welcome students by asking them to read their paper aloud and then giving them specific instruction on one kind of punctuation or grammatical rule. By giving different feedback on systemic errors (those that follow a consistent rule of grammar that can be applied in similar contexts) rather than on idiomatic errors (which reflect the maddening inconsistencies of English and must be memorized), tutors could begin to teach ELL students how to edit their own papers. Of course, only repeated visits over a semester may produce significant improvement. Luckily, the Writing Workshop is staffed by 6-7 highly qualified tutors and open 30 hours a week. In other words, with some minor adjustments, the Writing Workshop could become an incredibly valuable resource for UMD’s ELL students.

As a student advisor, Mohammad said that for many undergraduates, the stigma of tutoring can outweigh the threat of failing a class. Vang also acknowledged this: “A lot of people get the perception if you’re there you’re dumb, or whatever, but I never really thought that stuff.” Mohammad said he thinks that instructors should require some students to visit the tutoring center. By giving class credit, he reasoned, students would have an added incentive. However, Mai said that she resented one of her professors for recommending a tutor in lieu of providing further instruction:

I remember my professor gave me a piece of paper with the assignment, the only thing is, she forgot to tell us it was a formal essay. She said, ‘Write an essay answering these questions.’ So I answered, because in high school you do that, but when I turned it in she gave me a C or a D or whatever. And she

didn't write to explain, or to come talk to me. All she said was, 'Go to the tutoring center because I think you need help with your writing skills.' I went once, and it didn't help me; it wasn't effective. But all I needed to know was what she wanted: she wanted a formal paper. I wrote my formal paper, I got an A, and then she wrote: 'Oh, I see you've been going to the tutoring center,' but I hadn't! I think that when the professors say, 'Oh, you need to go to the tutoring center. They will be able to help you there,' I think that's just wrong because the reason why we're taking this class is so that the professor can help us. And if he or she can't help us what are they there for? We're paying them lots of money just for them to say, 'Oh, you need to go to the tutoring center.' The tutoring center should be secondary help; professors should be the primary help.

Like many immigrant students, Mai has had to work to support herself through college; therefore, she's very aware of the cost of her education and the amount of time she can dedicate to her studies. Instructors need to consider these factors if they decide to require students to get additional tutoring outside of class. Coco also said she prefers to go to the professor "Because their method of teaching is different than how tutoring centers will teach you."

Instructors

Many participants said that having a relationship with their instructor made all the difference in the world. Mohammad described a recurring problem he sees among the students he advises at the Multicultural Center: "There is a gap between the instructor and the students, and that is not created by the instructor but the students. So I always encourage them to 'have a connection with your teacher.'" Coco shared this belief:

I feel a lot of it is up to the student. That's when you need to reach out to your other resources, like talking to the teachers or the professors... If you feel you are not as proficient, I think you have to help yourself

get there. You can build that relationship with the teacher to get you there.

Vang agreed that these relationships are important, but he places the responsibility on the instructor: "It's really on the teachers to recognize the needs of the students to give that individual attention." Xiong said that he wished he had gotten that kind of support in freshman composition: "There should be more one-on-one for each student. The class that I took, the size wasn't that big, so the teacher should have taken a one-on-one chance with us." Many participants agreed that the instructor needed to initiate contact. Mai said: "A lot of students are intimidated to go to the professor. The only reason why I had to go to see [mine] is because he required [it]." Given this feedback, ELL students seemed to appreciate formal one-on-one instructor conferences.

College writing instructors may read this and think, "That's great, but I have 100 students and sit on two committees! How could I possibly find the time?" While Donald Murray asserts that one-on-one conferences are "the most effective—and the most practical—method of teaching composition" (2004, p. 147), one must remember that Murray exchanges class time to hold one-on-one conferences, a method that belongs to a larger pedagogical model that may be incompatible with some institutional policies. However, after presenting this finding to my colleagues last spring, several said that they hold quick one-on-one conferences within the classroom by roving around the class during in-class or lab assignments. Essentially, the goal is to allow students to ask questions that they would be too shy to address in the larger group and to allow instructors to better understand students' individual needs, an objective that can be accomplished in a variety of ways. Another colleague said that she takes full advantage of the time before and after class and finds that this "small talk" often makes her students feel more comfortable to approach her later with important questions.

Peers

Likemany college writing instructors, I assign in-class peer revision workshops to help with revision. Students are required

to bring a copy of their draft to share while they provide specific written feedback to another student. Participants described a wide range of reactions to this kind of in-class collaborative activity. Mohammad thought the workshops made him a better reader:

I always took it serious when I critiqued other people's papers. I am a slow reader and I tried to read it faster and respond at the same time, so it was kind of helpful, it actually pushed you to find the mistake, find the mistake! It's helpful.

Vang said he valued the feedback of his peers: "Like the class we have now, you probably edit something like three, four times before you turn it in, just to get it perfect. If I let someone else see it they may see something I didn't." Lora, who is Hmong and studying mechanical engineering, thought the workshops were uncomfortable but ultimately helpful:

We had six or seven papers we had to write on different topics and then like, we'd be in groups of four and trade, and then it was kind of intimidating because a lot of the other race would have better English, I suppose. It was just me and my other friends that are Asian in there, so for me it was kind of hard. After awhile, I became used to it, and since they are better in writing they did a lot of corrections on my paper so that helped a lot too.

A study has shown that ELLs tend to speak less than native-speakers during these kinds of activities (Zhu, 2001, p. 275). For these reasons, peer revision workshops have the potential to make ELL students feel excluded. Xiong said: "What I found out, those other students who are mostly white Caucasians have better writings and better papers...when I compared my paper to theirs I could tell that there's a big difference."

Lily had a similar experience:

To be the only Asian person nobody wanted to exchange papers with me. I tried though... I felt like, I don't know, it was like, I felt kind of left out. When I read oth-

er people's papers, it was better than mine.

These comparisons may have pushed Xiong to improve his writing, but they seemed to make Lily feel self-conscious. Sara's experiences with peer revision were even worse:

Some of them were so critical, so judgmental. For peer reviews, they were more critical than the professor! I don't know why. Of course, the reason for the peer review is to have somebody else check for your mistakes so you can go and correct it. But it felt like they went kind of beyond that, or like maybe for me being the minority was the issue, I don't know. They criticized a lot.

Lily and Sara's narratives tell us that students are very aware when they are the only person of color in the classroom. If they also feel uncertain about their writing abilities, it's likely that some ELLs will avoid peer revision workshops whenever possible. To make matters worse, these students' grades will suffer since most instructors require participation. Andre, who avoided the workshops for other reasons, lamented the fact that not participating lowered his grade for the class. Another international student found the peer revision sessions frustrating for other reasons:

To be honest, I don't think they really help me. I always ended up with someone who didn't know how to write. It just drove me nuts the way they would write. I would correct their grammar, and they would just read my paper and just say 'Oh, it's good.'

These stories illustrate how mismatched, untrained or overly critical peer revision groups can undermine the benefits of collaborative learning. According to Krashen's (1982) fifth hypothesis of the Monitor Model, anxiety, self-doubt and its subsequent apathy can block language acquisition. Krashen stresses the importance of not putting students "on the defensive" (74). Kasper & Petrello (1998) characterize the ideal learning environment for ELLs as one that reduces anxiety and promotes risk taking (181). However, I still think that mixed peer

revision groups can provide valuable learning experiences for both ELLs and native-speaking students with instructor guidance. Lily and Sara remind me that students need more than editing checklists: instructors should also model the activity, monitor group dynamics through quiet observation or anonymous surveys, as well as evaluate the quality of peer feedback.

Off-Campus Support

Understandably, many participants said they preferred to get help with writing from those they know and trust: friends and family. Mai had the opportunity to take her upper division Composition course as an independent study, which allowed her to form a peer review group with her friends:

We would write a paper and at the end of the week we're like, 'OK, we need to get together.' [We'd] revise each other's paper, make a copy and send it to the professor. When you're writing a paper on a computer screen you over-read a lot of stuff, in your head you know what you're writing, but you can make a mistake but not know you made a mistake. Your mind has already made up its mind. You can't see it for yourself. Somebody's got to tell you.

Karine and Audrey have formed a family with their hockey team, and Audrey said she doesn't know what she would do without that kind of support network.

Given either the physical distance from home or the fact that most immigrants are the first generation in their family to speak or write in English, many said they rely on siblings and cousins for help with writing assignments, not parents. Some recognized that this put them at a disadvantage. Pa remarked:

I grew up in a family who spoke Hmong, and then we barely spoke English and that made it difficult, and then in high school that's where we started speaking English more. And my parents don't really speak English now, and I guess that's a factor.

Xiong had a similar experience:

I guess in high school my writing wasn't that great because if you look at all the other students, like the white students, their parents were able to help them because they speak and write in English. With my parents, their grammar is not that good, (or that great), and then they can't really help me out. So I kind of struggle, and most of the things I learn I learn by myself, [or] by watching others write, (other Caucasians, white students), and you kind of pick up on their forms of writing.

These students⁶ don't blame their parents, but they recognize that native-English standard dialect students tend to have a higher fluency in the dominant school discourse. Nonetheless, studies show that the benefits of using the primary language at home (to maintain family traditions and intimate communication) far outweigh the inconvenience of having to rely on others to practice English (Crawford 1997; Wong-Fillmore 1991). Many participants said they speak Hmong only with the older generations in their family and community, but with their siblings and peers they "switch between the two languages," speaking what Coco called "Hmonglish."

When students do not speak English at home or cannot turn to their families for support with English, students may have to rely on peers and school resources (such as tutoring centers and instructors) to get help with writing assignments. Once again, instructors could learn a lot from an early in-class survey or autobiographical writing assignment to determine what language students speak at home and whom they turn to for help outside of class.

Adapting to Academic Discourse and Rhetoric

Flower and Hayes (1981) coined the term "cognitive overload" to describe how affective filters (emotional, intellectual, and social) can overwhelm students and consequently hinder comprehension and the composing process (33). In addition, ELLs must constantly interpret information, a process that can exhaust and overwhelm students. Mohammad described the challenge that most ELL students face in college:

For example, when we go to class we are not same as students who are native speakers, because in our mind, when instructors talk about something, we have to understand. We have to understand it, and translate it to our language because our brain is doing ten processes at the same time.

Mai expressed frustration with instructors who try to make exam questions more difficult, a practice which she feels discriminates against ELLs:

They like to change it to see if you are able to interpret what they are trying to say to answer it correctly. For us, when we look at the word in the sentence, we have to read it in English, and then switch, interpret into our own, and then try to understand what they are trying to ask, and then put it back into the English.

Specifically in freshman composition, many participants said they felt like the instructors need to do more to tailor the course for ELL students. Vang said:

In Comp, it seems like the teachers just assume the students are at the same level. The thing is, for many of us, English is our second language. If you ask us to speak, yeah, we can speak, if you ask us to write, yeah, we can write, but if you ask us to do a research paper, for a lot of us, we will struggle because we're not used to that kind of prose where you have to sit down and write ten pages of English. A lot of us can't write ten pages in Hmong, so it's hard enough to write in English.

These descriptions of cognitive overload indicate that ELL students must exert far more energy to produce the same amount of writing as native-English speakers. Given the cognitive gymnastics that some ELL students must perform to translate data and produce drafts, deadlines add yet another affective filter to learning. In some cases, instructors should extend

deadlines to level the playing field for ELLs (Leki, 1992, p. 87; Harris & Silva, 1993). Audrey and Karine said that they appreciated their lab instructors for giving them two more days to complete the writing assignments. They also had an instructor who allowed them to complete their assignments in French; however, until UMD hires a more diverse faculty, most immigrant students will not be able to enjoy this kind of accommodation.

Freshman composition is often students' first exposure to academic rhetoric, and sometimes American conventions and preferences are not compatible with those of other cultures (Harris & Silva, 1993, p. 527). For example, Ramanathan & Kaplan (1996) identify the underlying "tacit" assumptions that ten widely used freshman composition textbooks make about American cultural familiarity. They argue that the "inductive approach...assumes a set of cultural norms that many non-native [English] speakers do not necessarily possess" (23). They suggest that socialization of "essayist literacy" and "free-writing" begins early for American students and can give native-speakers another advantage in composition courses. Though stifling for some native-speaking students, UMD's focus on the claim-support-conclusion five-paragraph argumentative essay may in fact provide ELLs with an effective framework for understanding American rhetorical structures. However, instructors should introduce these forms for what they are: conventions of American discourse, not universal rules for "good writing."

Creating a Fair and Non-threatening Learning Environment

Immigrant students-of-color expressed more emotion in response to my seventh question ("Do you think college writing instructors should adapt any part of the course for students whose first language is not English?") than the Caucasian international students. Most of them said that, while they want more one-on-one support from instructors outside of class, they do not want instructors to draw attention to what makes them different from other students. Sara said that while she sometimes felt frustrated that her instructor assumed she knew the class material, she was glad that he didn't single her out: "If he would

have treated me differently I would have felt that he was dealing with me that way because I am a minority. I would have taken the issue to heart.” Pa was also sensitive to this possibility: “At first I was really upset because our first paper [she said] something about our English writing like it’s not good, so me and my friend, there were three Hmong girls in there, and it was like she was picking on us.” Mohammad gave this advice to instructors:

You don’t want to separate the students. You shouldn’t. You need to treat the students the same, I know from experience, I see from the students they just don’t want to be labeled, they run away from that label. Otherwise, when you do good things, people don’t see the good things. So you might think you’re helping the students but the students think, ‘Oh no, he is discriminating!’

You don’t want to put yourself in that spot.

Understanding individual needs and abilities requires getting to know students, and there are several ways to do this: one-on-one conferences, an open-door policy, and assigning an autobiographical essay at the beginning of the semester. In fact, some researchers recommend that composition instructors assign these essays to students to serve as self-evaluative tools to lessen the anxiety associated with grades (Kasper & Petrello, 1998). Their study demonstrates that most of ELL students’ anxiety about writing has more to do with assessment than writing itself.

Inevitably, the University values grades, and so do students. Grades provide a way for instructors to communicate expectations, measure progress, provide specific feedback, organize the class (Walvoord & Anderson, 1998). When instructors use the right approach, grades do not have to incite the anxiety associated with competition. Mai gave an excellent example:

I have some professors who say, ‘I expect all of you to get an A,’ and that’s good because then he’s looking at us as individuals. Then you compete against yourself, and then you can help each other, you make friends,

and you can get over your shyness. Maybe even enough to go talk to the professor!

However, grades can also terminate the writing process and end communication between the instructor and the student. Xiong said: “We didn’t get any one-on-one, he was just like, ‘Turn in a paper, I’ll just grade you.’ He just gave back marks and stuff like that. You can’t really learn from marks.” Xiong said that, instead, he wanted more time to complete his papers, along with one-on-one feedback on how he could improve his drafts. Donald Murray would say that Xiong has the right idea: these elements make students better writers. Instead of grading drafts, Murray holds regular meetings and peer revision workshops to allow students to develop their drafts throughout the semester. He provides limited written feedback and grades papers only after the student has determined the piece is “done” (Murray, 2004, p. 143).

When instructors grade drafts, they take away students’ control of the revision process (Leki, 1992, p. 124). Once students relinquish this control, they will cease to care about the writing, and then learning stops. In fact, quantitative research⁷ suggests that written corrections do not improve subsequent drafts for ELL students; instead, sustained practice in writing English is the most salient factor to predict improvement (Robb, Ross & Shortreed, 1986, p. 89). This study suggests that if instructors give any written feedback on ELL student papers, they should comment only on “global errors” (which affect meaning) and limit corrections to only one kind of “local” (grammatical) error per paper (94). This will prevent overwhelming the student with red marks, a practice which Xiong said does no good.

Reflection

Of course, such a small qualitative sample does present contradictions and inconclusive evidence, but it also provides a snapshot of a particular group’s consciousness in a particular place and time. Based on the comments that I heard repeated throughout the interviews I have arrived at several broad conclusions:

1. Though they are often lumped into the same category of “ESL” international and immigrant students

have very different needs and backgrounds. Their motivation to learn English is not easily cut and dried between “instrumental and integrative,” meaning that not all international students plan to return to their home country, and not all immigrants want to immerse themselves in mainstream U.S. culture.

2. ELL students want (and say they benefit from) one-on-one support, though they may not seek it out themselves; therefore, instructors should invite students to visit them outside of class or use other methods to facilitate regular one-on-one communication.

3. ELL students do not want to be singled out in class in front of other students, but they are motivated by positive recognition. Instructors may also consider making special arrangements with ELLs who are struggling (i.e.: deadline extensions, more accessible texts, explicit grammar exercises, etc.).

4. Classes of mixed language backgrounds may require special handling. On one hand, ELLs say they learn from native-English speakers, but they are also sensitive to critique from their peers. If they choose to use it, instructors should carefully manage peer revision sessions.

5. ELL students are easily overwhelmed by written corrections and comments. Instructors could help ELLs by focusing first on “global” errors that affect meaning, and by providing additional instruction on systemic errors.

As “gatekeepers” freshman composition instructors bear not only the responsibility of orienting students from every discipline to general academic discourse and research methods; they often need to help students to navigate important college resources, such as the library, tutoring centers, and support services. Given the relatively small class sizes in most freshman comp courses, they may also be the only instructor who knows the student’s name in that first year. Though desirable,

one does not need a certificate in ESL to begin to address the needs of ELLs; a little sensitivity can go a long way. By trying to understand students' individual needs and goals, providing information about on-campus resources, maintaining a supportive attitude and an open-door policy, freshman composition instructors have a lot to offer the English Language Learner.

Notes

1. The term English-Language Learners (ELL) describes the students who are learning English in school (Commins and Miramontes, 2005, p. 171); whereas English as a Second Language (ESL) describes programs and classes that focus on language development (p. 172). Many researchers point out that both of these terms lack precision: since many students in these classes are learning English as their third or fourth language; and the ultimate goal for any program is language "acquisition," not "learning." However, given the common use of these terms in current educational research, I will use them throughout this article.

2. According to the UMD website, only 119 international students and 638 "minority" students were registered for classes for Fall, 2005. Most immigrant students (Hmong, Vietnamese, Somalian, Eritrean, and Latin American) probably fall within the minority category, though the exact numbers are impossible to quantify and would not account for ELL immigrants from Eastern Europe or northern Asia. The admissions office does not record the number of students who identify themselves as ELL, nor do all ELL students identify themselves as such; therefore, I can only make a rough estimate that ELL students comprise between 3-4% of the total student body at UMD.

3. Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	First Language	Family Home	Major
Ana	Female	Serbian	Minnesota	Graphic Design
Andre	Male	Russian	Kazakhstan	Computer Engineering
Audrey	Female	French	Montreal, Canada	Education
Coco	Female	Hmong	Minnesota	Sociology
Karen	Female	French	Montreal, Canada	Unknown
Lily	Female	French & Hmong	Unknown	Unknown
Lora	Female	Hmong	Minnesota	Mechanical Engineering
Mai	Female	Hmong	Minnesota	Pre-med
Mohammad	Male	Somali	Minnesota	Business
Nicole	Female	Unknown	Unknown	Education
Pa	Female	Hmong	Minnesota	Elementary Ed
Sara	Female	Somali	Minnesota	Pre-med
Suzannah	Female	German	Zurich, Switzerland	Economics
Vang	Male	Hmong	Minnesota	Political Science
Xiong	Male	Hmong	Minnesota	Criminology

3. Though I have tried to convey participants' natural vernacular, for the sake of clarity I have omitted the colloquial "you knows," "ums," and "likes."

4. After I finished the first full draft I sent a copy to each participant to allow them to see which words I selected from their interview and the context in which I framed them. At that time they could revise their statements, change their pseudonym, or completely withdraw from the study. I was fortunate that none opted to do this, but several did select a pseudonym that better represented their cultural background.

5. Some schools use the acronym PHLOTE for "Primary or Home Language Other Than English" (Commins & Miramontes, 2005, p. 172).

6. Robb, Ross & Shortreed (1986) studied 676 compositions by 134 Japanese college freshman over two semesters and used four different feedback methods. They ranged from overt correction to marginal tabulations which did not indicate the error or its exact location. Using one subjective and 18 objective measures of writing ability, the researchers then tabulated surface-level errors and compared the quantitative data

between the four feedback groups. They found that while the overt correction group showed improvements in surface structure in the second drafts, after a hiatus, the third and fourth compositions reverted back to the same errors. At the end of the study, the surface structure accuracy in the overt correction group was no better than the marginal tabulation group (88). The researchers concluded that written feedback has little to no effect on long-term improvement in ELL writing.

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