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Responding to non-native speakers of English

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Most instructors encounter non-native speakers of English or ESL students (students with English as their second language) in their classes at one point or another. Although native speakers of English also have problems with writing, non-native speakers' problems can be quite different, and the approach taken by the instructor needs to be different as well. The following list of ideas and suggestions will help you recognize and respond to the typical problems for ESL students. Some services are available on campus to help non-native speakers, but the majority of the improvement will need to come from comments made by the instructor. Although standards for grading must remain the same for native and non-native speakers in a class, the instructor may need to alter the approach of teaching and commenting slightly for the non-native speaker.

Overall

Generally, instructors find non-native speakers' papers overwhelming because there are several issues that need to be addressed. It is sometimes difficult to determine if the student is simply a weak writer, or if too little time has been spent on the draft, or if the kinds of mistakes stem from a lack of knowledge and experience of U.S. academic writing standards. While their American peers are usually satisfied and sufficiently directed with a few well-worded comments, most non-native speakers expect and need more extensive commenting. In fact, the role of the teacher in most countries is to correct everything, so even the comments the American instructor gives may seem inadequate to many of the international students. Most ESL-trained teachers say that they take the following approaches with their students.

Suggested approaches:

- Put more direct, instructive and extensive comments on papers, for example, "You need a thesis statement at the beginning of this paper." The instructor might even find such a statement later in the paper and tell the student where the American audience would expect to find it.

- Try to focus on the content and ignore the grammar at first, so you can determine what else needs work.

- If only one draft will be seen, put comments about both the grammar and the organization, but don't just correct the grammar. The exceptions are articles, prepositions, and word choice or idiomatic expressions, which need to be corrected because there are few rules or patterns or, as in the case of articles, they are very complex in English.

- Try to put more marginal comments instead of just end or front comments. Even if the paper looks filled with comments, it will help the student to see comments at the place of concern. Few non-native speakers have ever told me that they were overwhelmed when they saw all the comments. Many, however, have told me that the comments were too brief and not instructional enough. Remember that most non-native speakers have not had years of American-style writing instruction and need to have more direction.

- Make sure the assignment sheets spell out organizational expectations and guidelines. Non-native speakers often depend on printed materials instead of their listening skills.

- In class, write more on the board than you might for an all native-speaker class. It will help non-native speakers understand better and will reinforce what has been said in class discussions. (Often, non-native speakers have a hard time understanding their peers because of the students' poorly organized statements and the ESL students' poor listening skills.)

Specific approaches to typical problems for non-native speakers
GRAMMAR

The most obvious problem for virtually all ESL writers is gr ammar.

Recognizing grammar problems is so easy that it tends to mask the more serious problems   of the ESL writer. It may also mask the good points of the paper and   cause you to overlook the depth or insights presented in the paper . Writing grammar corrections all o ver a paper causes a student to focus only on grammar and not realiz e that "fixing the gr ammar" ma y not significantly impro ve the other problems. Most ESL writers cannot focus on both gr ammar and dev elopment of ideas at the same time. They must first write their ideas and then edit for gr ammar.

Possible alternative approaches:

- Comment on grammar only after the organization and content of the paper are   reviewed, so you will avoid the trap of over-correctin g the grammar and ignoring the content.

- Put a lot of written comments about organization and ideas and only circle   grammar errors (if they are minor).

- Ask the student to hand in another dr aft for grammar comments after the ideas   are more organized.

- If there are some consistent problem areas (ignore article problems,   since they are so complex in English), then correct or pro vide a rule for that area and ask the student to correct THAT mistake throughout the paper. An ESL specialist at Student W riting Support can help with article usage.

- Decide what is toler able WRITING ACCENT —ideas are understandable though the   paper still contains minor errors such as singular/plur al agreement problems and article errors.

- Suggest that the student use Student W riting Support with a tr ained ESL specialist.

GAPS

Sometimes for cultur al reasons, non-nativ e writers ma y have fewer written connections between ideas.

There will often be jumps between ideas with fewer written explanations   of how the ideas are connected. Man y cultures, particularly Asian cultures,   would not insult the intelligent reader (especially a professor) b y stating the obvious connections between ideas. American readers, on the other hand, w ant all connections of thought and tr ansitions stated in black and white, not between the lines. Comments on papers must be more specific   than "This is not clear ." Another aspect of this problem is the lack of examples or specific explanation for ideas. Compared to other   cultures, students often sa y we "beat a dead horse" with explanations,   examples and other evidence.

Suggested comments:

- Directed comments about what the student needs are usually most helpful. T ry comments like, "You need more explanation or ano ther example here."

- Provide some examples of connectiv e sentences for ESL writers. Some teachers will revise one or two par agraphs, pro viding the tr ansitional words, phr ases and sentences for the student so he or she can see good examples of our connectiv e devices. (This will be a v ery hard concept for man y ESL writers to learn and change because it tak es time to change one's thinking process—especially if the student has been a successful writer in his or her own language.)

- Talk to the student about the differences in cultur al styles and ask about his or her cultur al expectations of writing. Some students will be una ware of these differences, but man y are very insightful and will help y ou understand their background.

LOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

"Logical dev elopment" is v ery cultur ally defined.

Possibly the most difficult problem to diagnose relates to the logical and thorough   development of ideas as they relate to cultur al training. What an American   considers logical in an academic paper

may not be logical in another culture. Because of cultural training, some internationals will have trouble sticking to a thesis, narrowing a thesis sufficiently , or proving a thesis concretely enough for an American audience. You may find that the point is difficult to find or understand because of the difference in presentation. Of course, this is not true of every writer from other cultures. Some students have had a lot of practice writing for an American audience, while others have simply translated styles as well as language. Comments on logical development should be abundant in a non-native speaker's papers.

Many ESL students do not recognize that the American style is very direct and very narrow (in comparison to their style). For example, look at the last paragraph of the last page to find a thesis in many Japanese writers' papers. It is often stated quite clearly there, but you may have had to guess throughout the paper what the student has been trying to say or prove. For another example, many cultures admire the beauty of the language as much as the message. A South American may want to put too many flowery words into an academic paper and will often report that American writing is very boring. They may also appear to be straying from the initial thesis as the paper progresses. Many writers educated in other cultures have never been trained to write in a direct (or , as they say, "blunt and colorless") style.

How another person's cultural style differs from an American's style is new knowledge to many non-native writers, even very experienced ESL writers, and it takes practice to recognize and change the style to fit an American academic audience. If you help the student understand that an American audience often expects a thesis statement to come early in academic writing, and   that all other points would need to prove the thesis in a very direct way, it will help the student become a better writer for an American audience. (There is much discussion of late about whether to change the American audience's expectations or whether to make others change to fit our traditional style. I believe that ESL students should at least be aware of the variances in expectations within an American university setting.)

Suggested comments:

- Comments about logical development should, as much as possible, be formulated in clear , direct statements. Although there is a place in papers for comments given in the form of questions, when it comes to thesis statements and logical development, questions like "Does this belong here?" can be more confusing than "This statement would be clearer if   stated at the beginning of the paragraph (for an American audience)."

- Help the students come up with an outline before writing the first draft. It is frustrating for students to spend a lot of time writing a paper just to find out that they need to start over with a more narrow thesis.

- Some instructors will give the opportunity for any student to submit a plan (not a draft) via e-mail so they don't feel like they are singling out the ESL students. Others approach the weaker students (ESL included) and ask them to submit a plan.

EVIDENCE

What constitutes solid evidence in the U.S. is different from some other cultures.
In some cultures, the more passionately a point is argued, the more it   is believed. In others, personal experience would never constitute good evidence. In still others, quoting "the masters" is   the most reliable evidence. In the U.S. academic setting, we highly value research statistics, personal experience or observation, and words of current authorities. Without these types of evidence, papers are considered weak. Furthermore, logical reasoning is highly valued, but that reasoning is usually from an American perspective and assumes knowledge of the counterarguments.

Suggested responses:

- Instead of assuming the student has not done enough research, tell the student what type of evidence is expected for an American audience and where to find that type of evidence.

- Encourage summarizing or paraphrasing instead of quoting long sections of authorities' ideas, being especially clear about why this is important in U.S. writing.

CRITICAL THINKING

Teachers frequently complain about non-native speakers' lack of critical thinking.

Although this is the biggest complaint I hear from university instructors about all students, international students may be displaying a different problem than Americans. Culturally, many non-native speakers have a very high regard for what is written by someone else. They are taught that using someone else's words in a paper is more important than their own interpretations or opinions. In some cultures, they are seldom asked to (publicly) criticize, evaluate, or think deeply about an authority's written words. Questioning and evaluating are intricate parts of U.S. culture, but many cultures have been taught to accept, not question—at least in writing. For South East Asians educated in American high schools, the problem may include some cultural conflicts, but there is an added problem as well. Depending on when they arrived in the U.S., they may not have had a chance to develop critical thinking skills in American high schools. They were often busy trying to pick up the English language in mainstream classrooms at the age when their native-speaker peers were concentrating on developing critical thinking skills. However, after some extra help and practice, ESL students often are able to formulate unique and insightful opinions that many Americans lack the world experience for.

Suggested comments:

- Ask leading questions like, "Why are they saying this?", or "Why do YOU think....?", thus giving them permission to make inferences about the author's thoughts.

- Make it very clear to students that you expect them to form an opinion about a piece instead of simply summarizing it.

- Make comments or give examples about how to connect personal opinion/viewpoints and other sources. Most internationals have not had a lot of practice with these connections.

ASSIGNMENT INTERPRETATION

Teachers often report that their ESL writer has totally misunderstood the intentions of the assignment.

Although listening and other language skills often enter into the misinterpretation of an assignment, there may be other factors. The assignment may include a lot of cultural or historical information that is beyond the knowledge of the ESL student. For example, asking a student to analyze a certain event in U.S. history will probably be more difficult for a foreign student than for someone who has lived in the U.S. all his or her life. Students in first-year writing courses may have special difficulties because so many of the topics are approached from an American viewpoint. They may also lack knowledge of the audience's needs and expectations surrounding style, tone or background knowledge.

Suggested approaches:

- Use the international students in the class as cultural (international) informants. Many American students could benefit from a wider world view of historical events.

- Invite the ESL student to your office hours to discuss assignment expectations.

- Suggest that ESL students hand in a preliminary draft so the teacher has a chance to discuss any misinterpretation problems before the assignment is due.

- Describe the audience and the needs of the audience.

PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism is often interpreted culturally.

What and how sources are documented varies widely around the world. What may appear to be blatant plagiarism could be a lack of knowledge of American documentation techniques. Also, because others' words are deemed more important than the student's, it may seem that there is an overuse of other sources with little of the student's opinion or ideas established. Furthermore, in many cultures, students work together on projects, so identical papers could be turned in to you without the student knowing how an American teacher would view this practice. Also, "sharing" of papers from past semesters is commonly practiced in some cultures, so students should be clearly

warned what the consequences of such sharing   should be. Explicitly stating expectations early in the semester regardless of all issues of plagiarism can often help a void major confrontations later.

Suggested approaches:

- Define plagiarism clearly and thoroughly in y our syllabus. Don't assume all of your students will understand what it is.

- Be a suspicious reader —not with the intention of punishing the student, but wi th the intention of addressing plagiarism before the student writes papers for another class and is reported for scholastic misconduct. (85% of all scholastic misconduct reports of plagiarism at the U of M are against ESL students.)

- Once plagiarism is suspected, ha ve a frank one-to-one discussion of what constitutes plagiarism in the U .S.

- In most cases, giv e an opportunit y to rewrite a paper , unless it has been a tho roughly copied paper or other v ery blatant example of plagiarism.

- Student W riting Support is prepared to spend extr a time explaining the expectations of documentation in an American univ ersity.

READING COMPREHENSION

Many teachers encounter problems with ESL students' lack of understanding   of an assigned reading.

Although it is most often assumed ESL students don't understand readings   because of the English vocabulary, this problem is also lik ely to result from some other sources. There ma y be some cultur al assumptions in the reading that   most Americans would easily understand, but there ma y be numerous subtle ideas that would not be easily recogniz ed by the non-nativ e speaker. Because of the differences in organizational patterns in the US , even picking out the main idea of a piece can be difficult for some students.

Suggested approaches:

- Be prepared to spend time individually with students for explanations of the concepts presented in a reading.

- Possibly, assess the readings more closely for cultur al implications before assigning them. Does a reading assume too much mainstream cultur al knowledge? If so , maybe you can spend time individually with the student explaining the readings.

- If the ideas of the readings are discussed in class, try to review what has been said at the end of the hour. Many ESL students can't pick up the main ideas from a loose   discussion-based class.

TIME CONSTRAINTS

Because of the lack of experience with other ESL issues, non-nativ   e speakers will usually need a lot more time to write and rewrite.

When students are faced with in-class, timed writing such as essa   y questions on a test or first -day writing samples, the non-nativ e speaker will alw ays be at a disadv antage.

Suggested approaches:

- Some instructors will allow the non-nativ e speaker to tak e more time.

- Other instructors assure the student that they will be focusing on ideas and   will mostly ignore grammar mistak es in timed writing.

- Hand out writing assignments early enough in the semester so the non-nativ   e speaker has ample planning, writing, and rewriting time.

GRADING STANDARDS

Although man y instructors ha ve learned by trial and error how to work with ESL students, gr ading is still a confusing task. How can you grade the ESL student fairly wh en the paper still has gr ammar errors? No one approach is the RIGHT approach, but here is a collection   of ideas that work for some instructors.

Possible alternative approaches:

- One approach is to categoriz e what y ou are grading. Try using a written or mental checklist that categoriz es several areas such as o rganization, critical thought, narrowed thesis, and grammar with the hea viest weight of the gr ade being critical thought and organization. Less weight should be giv en to categories su ch as grammar and sentence structure. In this w ay, if the student has v ery good organization and ideas, he or she is giv en credit in those categories, but is gr aded down for sentence structure only in one area. This he lps the student realize that the paper has sev eral aspects that are worth looking at. Most teachers using this method will gr ade down only on areas that interfere with understanding of tho ughts. Minor problems such as subject -verb agreeme nt, article usage, etc. , are usually o verlooked or viewed as toler able writing accent.

- Another method is to gr ade primarily on content, but to circle t ypes of errors on the final draft and ask the student to correct and hand in a clean cop y now that the ideas are clear (or at least gr aded). This ensures that the subject has not had someone else chan ge the ideas along with the gr ammar, or if y ou expect the student to get help at all, that should be clearly stated. If y ou expect the students to ha ve someone else "fix" their dr afts before handing them in, then this should be clearly stated at the beginning of the semester . If this t ype of help is seen as a form of plagiarism (another person doing work that should be done b y the student) then this should also be clearly stated, but some consistency should   be established for the whole class.

- Some instructors prefer another method. Students hand in final dr afts for a grade on the due date (which does not include an y penalty from gr ammar errors), but when the paper is handed back, the student ma y take the paper to a writing center and work with a tutor . The goal should not be a completely corrected dr aft, but a reasonably changed dr aft. If y ou expect an absolutely clean dr aft, y ou are forcing someone else to simply go through the paper and correct it. The tutor can help the student in a few major areas instead of simply correcting the dr aft with the student. The corrected v ersion does not change the grade, but is simply an additional step the student ma y take before receiving the gr ade. In other words, an additional draft is required of the ESL student, but the student has not been penaliz ed for grammar errors on the final dr aft. (It also seems that the same str ategy could be suggested for native speak ers with poor gr ammatical or mechanical skills if you suggest it for the non-native speak er.)

Final advice

The worst possibilities are to correct the dr aft completely for the student, to ignore the gr ammar totally, or to pick out an area of insignificance for the student to work on. There needs to be a balanced approach when working with the student.

I am available to look o ver a draft or discuss how to work with a student's gr ammar errors or other aspects of the paper so y ou can ha ve a reasonable, balanced approach to working with y our non-native speak ers.

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