

# **Editor's Introduction: ELL Outreach and Teaching Strategies**

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Students have distinct educational, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, so to create an inclusive learning environment, faculty should adopt English Language Learner (ELL) outreach and teaching strategies. In general, one's English literacy skills depending on their level of acculturation. Quite simply, those who are well integrated with American society will be less anxious and have a better ability to function in classrooms. ELL student success also depends on regular practice speaking and writing English. Developing academic skills requires strong study skills and instruction. With outreach and intervention efforts, ELL students can get the support they need to be successful.

## **Identifying an ELL Student**

In the online classroom, your first hint that a student speaks English as another language will likely be on the first discussion forum post or written assignment. From my own experience, some immediate in-text indicators of an ELL student are typically:

- Misuse of prepositions
- Misuse of articles
- Misuse of gerunds and infinitives
- Incorrect word order

These areas of language are problematic for English Language Learners because they require both formal learning and informal conversation exposure to master. As a result, we can find these same errors in the writing of beginning learners of English and advanced learners. The errors themselves can help identify an ELL but do not in any way indicate their level.

It takes years to learn and acquire a language, and research shows it takes at least seven years for nonnative speakers to acquire academic vocabulary (Collier as cited in Severino, 2009, p. 57). With this in mind, we must remember that an ELL student's literacy skills do not reflect that same student's educational background or literacy level in their native language.

## **Conducting Outreach**

The beginning of the term will be the most difficult for ELL students who are adjusting to the culture and requirements of an academic environment with a new, specialized language. This is especially true in online educational settings. ELL students who feel confident with their language skills upon enrollment may suddenly feel challenged by the intensive reading and writing required in

a non-native language, and they may misunderstand what they otherwise wouldn't if they were not so overwhelmed by new vocabulary and the often outdated, overly strict time constraints of testing procedures.

When you identify an ELL student in your class, consider taking one or more of the following steps:

- **Contact the student.** Acknowledge any struggle you have noticed and offer to answer any questions about the class.
- **Empower the student.** Create an opportunity for the student to self-identify as ELL by showing interest and asking **open-ended questions** about the student's experience so far
- After establishing a rapport in which the student has self-identified as ELL, **inquire about the student's first language** or experience acquiring or learning English.
- Once a student self-identifies (self-identification will always have more positive results than labeling a student based upon a blanket institutional metric), **reassure the student** that he or she will be an asset to the class. Affirm that while it will be hard work and all students are held to the same standards, writing and study skill support at the Writing Center or Student Success Center is available, and you have high expectations for their success.
- **Provide your contact information (including mobile video conferencing app)** and office hours with an invitation to ask questions about the course or assignments.
- **Monitor the student's progress, follow up and stay in touch** with the student throughout the term. Student retention improves when communication lines are open and the number of student "touches" is high.
- **Inform the student that the Writing Center offers one-on-one tutoring and paper review services.** Provide the student the link to sign-up for tutoring or submit an appointment on the student's behalf. By submitting that form, students can receive a warm, personalized invitation to tutoring from a writing tutor or center coordinator.
- If it is early in the term and the student is struggling because of being overwhelmed, **allow time for adjustment.** If the student is still struggling in Unit 2, inform the student that you would like to refer him or her to the Writing Center.

## Contacting the Student

Email is the most efficient way to reach students, but it can also be difficult for ELL students who struggle with reading as much as writing; they may not understand your tone or the message or have the confidence or formal writing skills to reply accordingly or appropriately.

When you write to your ELL students,

- **use plain language**—simple vocabulary, short sentences, and repetition;
- define academic vocabulary terms immediately when you use them;
- be explicit about any action you want the student to take;
- if you do not receive a reply, write again or better, **call the student**.

**Phoning** a student shows your support and gives you a clearer idea about the struggles the student is having. Share your observations but make the goal of the call to openly listen to the student.

**Since writing skills are learned and do not reflect the ELL student’s knowledge or intelligence**, listening to the student will give you a better sense of the student’s ability to succeed in the class.

When speaking with an ELL student,

- speak slowly but in a normal tone and volume;
- pronounce each word clearly;
- pause and check for comprehension by echoing their language; and
- listen.

**Video conferencing** is truly the best way to meet with an ELL student when you cannot do so in person because you can use gestures, see facial expressions and reactions, and you can use visuals such as showing the student what you mean by pointing to an area of the text. Little things matter during these calls—a smile goes a long way.

## **Culture**

ELL students are not only learning another language, but also the ways of a new culture and academic environment. Assessment and evaluation methods differ between cultures. In many cultures, multiple-choice tests are not common, so some ELL students would not be familiar with the process of eliminations presented in U.S. schools as early as Kindergarten.

Essay organization, too, which reflects the way we organize thought, is cultural. It will not be natural for Hispanic students, for example, to use a thesis-support structure. They may resist the idea of being so direct because, in Hispanic composition, all perspectives are given before any conclusion is drawn, and even then, presenting a final or singular point from the many is not the goal of communication as it almost always is in American dialogue. A variant to the normal essay organization an instructor expects is often seen as unintelligent when really it is a failure on the educator's part to be inclusive to diverse cultural thought patterns.

The chart below illustrates the various ways different cultures organize thought and how one's culture may therefore affect an ELL student's approach to organizing ideas in writing:

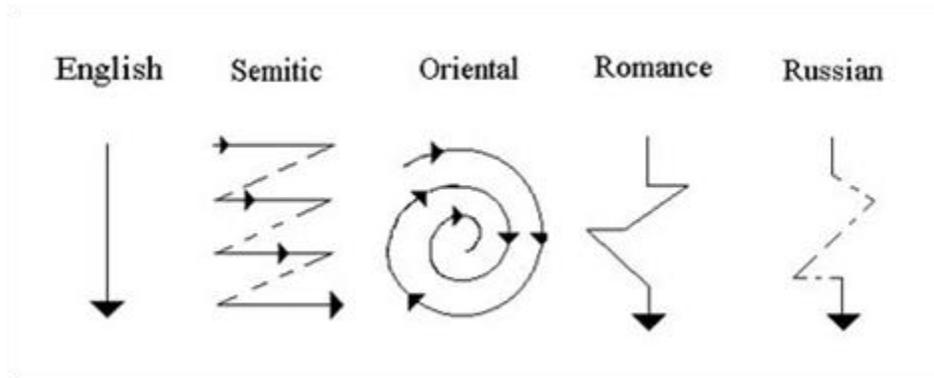


Figure 1. Chart from “Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education” from Language Learning by Kaplan, 1966.

Kaplan’s comparison also helps explain why it can be difficult to find the main idea or thesis in a non-native speaker’s essay. It may be at the end of the paper; **it may never be given**; the writer may seem to go off on a tangent in the middle as opposed to the linear structure expected in English. ELL students have many questions about organization. Here are some tips to address those questions:

- Invite students to discuss how they would organize a paper in their first language and compare that to the expectations of their assignments in **any class that assigns writing assignments**. Otherwise, educators have not assured that they are treating their students fairly regarding assessment.
- Provide ELL students a sample outline to illustrate how their paper should be organized. We only know what we know. Samples are important to all students, especially ELL students.

- Always provide students the opportunity to submit a rough draft or outline for review or allow them time to conduct peer reviews or submit a draft to the Writing Center or Student Success Center for review.

When ELL students become aware of the American style and how it contrasts to their first language, they will be less likely to translate (Kaplan, 1999). It may sound funny to refer to an academic paper as having an American style, but the linear approach to organization used in English is just a style—it is cultural, not universal. Being aware of cultural influences of thought and writing will help you be proactive about supporting your ELL students and create an inclusive learning environment that fosters respect for all cultures. Leave grading grammar to the writing and grammar courses. Grade on knowledge rather than linguistic skills.

### **Providing Feedback on ELL Student Writing**

#### Sandwich Comments

Look for the good and acknowledge strengths or what you do understand before **gently** pointing out the areas of concern. Never just tell an ELL student that their APA was wrong, for example, with no other feedback.

#### Higher-Order Concerns

- Offer feedback on organization and focus before addressing grammar. If the student does not have a formal introduction, for example, that would be more pivotal to revision than a sentence-level error.

## Lower Order Concerns

- When you remark on sentence-level errors, prioritize patterns of error more than random mistakes.
- For random mistakes, **point out where the structure or usage is done correctly** or provide your own example and suggest they edit their paper to follow that pattern to catch any inconsistencies.
- Limit remarks on grammar to only those errors that prevent understanding and avoid penalizing language acquisition errors.

## Inclusive Lecturing

During class, there are several strategies that you can use to accommodate ELL students:

- Pause between sentences.
- Review frequently to reinforce learning.
- Summarize key points in the simplest language, break ideas down.
- Check often for comprehension.
- Use visuals to support important points.
- Wait about five to ten seconds for students to respond to questions.
- Allow students to chat privately before providing individual responses.
- Provide students a copy of your presentation slides.
- Encourage students to form study groups.

## Extra Time

ELL students are responsible for learning the content of the course and for learning how to communicate their grasp of the material in a new language. This causes ELL students to take longer than native English speakers to comprehend directions, read and respond to Discussion Board posts, conduct research, take exams, and write papers. Extra time can therefore be the greatest help one can offer an ELL student. Students should not have to demonstrate a “low enough” skill level to qualify. Accommodations should be agreed upon at the institutional level and provided to any ELL student that requests such accommodation.

When possible, allow extra time to revise or rewrite work that is incomprehensible or otherwise unacceptable since this may also entail scheduling a tutoring appointment and learning yet another new academic convention such as a citation style or the cultural perception of plagiarism. In fact, even just allowing a student extra time to think about or look up a term before responding to a question will enable them to participate more fully in class.

## **Conclusion**

Working with ELL students is incredibly rewarding but challenging at the same time. This issue of wonderful contributors will explore more deeply some of the issues outlined above and numerous others as well. *The Wisconsin English Journal* is incredibly proud to offer this issue to our readership and hope you find the content beneficial and thought-provoking.

## **References**

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