

Suggestions for Teaching Writing to English Language Learners

“Good writing has very long sentences, is difficult for readers to understand, uses lots of “big words” to impress the reader and what the author wants to say is at the end.”

--a Japanese student

Differences in cultural assumptions about good writing:

- Thesis Placement. Many cultures put the main argument at the end of the essay and use intervening paragraphs to mount evidence to reach that conclusion. We place our claim at the start as well as creating a map of where we are headed and what evidence will support it. For many ESL students, this “loaded” first paragraph feels like you give away the point too early. For many, reworking their mode of writing, ingrained since their earliest essays, where the thesis is the reader reward, requires a major restructuring of the way they think.
- Culture of Originality vs. Culture of Authority. We value the individual voice, want the student to present his/her view, feel entitled to speak freely, and comment on the views of experts. Often, elsewhere, the views of experts take precedence over one’s own. Asian students in particular are taught to value the teacher, the scholar, the text above their own views. We also teach what is often confusing—be original, but borrow heavily from others.
- Ownership of Ideas. We emphasize the ownership of ideas and value intellectual property. Many cultures make no such distinctions and freely adapt the work of others. Concepts of plagiarism, therefore, are tricky to grasp. ESL students often use outside sources without attribution without grasping its seriousness. In some cultures, teachers urge students to share answers and homework, making no individual distinction regarding authorship. Getting it “right” pre-empts doing it yourself. Academic integrity, as we understand it, has little meaning in this context,
- Sense of Self. Discourse practices construct and reflect our cultural and social identities. To change a discourse practice is to reinvent the self in a new, often uncomfortable, way. One Chinese writer, a grad student who became an English Ph.D., speaks of how he became an “I” in Western discourse, having always conceived of himself as a “we.”
- Diplomatic vs. bold speech. Some cultures teach writers to avoid taking a stand which could offend others, to hide one’s own opinion; it is not just polite, it is respectful. We tend to value the clear position, well-defended. Many cultures value informative essays where both sides are presented without the writer taking a position on them.. Success is measured by how accurately a student can pull together the important sources, not what he or she says about them.
- Imitating the experts. English language learners often think that mimicking the experts and employing the jargon of the writers they read is good practice. The discerning use of discipline-specific terms is important, but jargon, run-on sentences, and dense paragraphs, despite what the experts do, does not a paper make clear. Teach the difference.

What you can do:

- **Set limited goals.** Ask what the student wants to work on. A common error is to “correct” too much on one essay – circling all of the grammar errors and tackling the big issues of thesis and evidence. Research into how students learn indicates that less is more; only so much new material can be absorbed at a time. Choose a focus—structure or grammar—but don’t try to fix the whole thing. A good rule of thumb is to fortify strengths through praise, highlight the learning tasks key to success in your class, connect the student with resources.
- **Be accessible.** In other cultures, teachers are often unapproachable. Invite them to ask you questions, meet you after class, come to an appointment during office hours. Then explain that you are there to offer support, answer questions, and ask if the student wants a followup meeting after an essay or exam.
- **Understand the learning issue.** If an essay is incomprehensible, or an exam is a near failure, rather than covering it with comments or assigning an F, find out what the student understands through a discussion. What kind of comprehension issue is it—of the material or of English? Is it listening or reading? Did he or she grasp the assignment?
- **Consider culture shock:** students newly arrived are often physically and emotionally overwhelmed by the demands of a new language and culture. Speaking English requires constant effort and cultural differences assault the senses making early efforts at academic success non-representative of the student’s capacity once adjusted.
- **Assume intelligence.** It is easy to equate silence or chaotic writing with student weakness. Instead, realize that the student is most likely a top performer at home. His or her confusion or “failure” in English is not representative of academic potential. Educate yourself by getting to know that student.
- **Be patient.** Know that change is slow and improvement in conceptual sophistication usually leads to temporary language deterioration.
- **Have the student read a paragraph aloud and summarize his/her main point.** Often, ESL students can clarify their own points (and correct grammar) once they hear their own words.
- **Together, make a simple outline of the argument** and the main evidence *before* reading the essay. Rephrase for the student what he or she is trying to say in English that more accurately uses academic norms.
- **Work with resources.**
 - Write the ESL Program for help for the student.
 - Urge them to use the writing center and/or request a grammar tutorial.
 - Comment on particular patters and urge them to work on them using Diana Hacker’s *Rules for Writers*, which all first years own.
 - Use your Teaching Fellows to work one-on-one with a student.