**Tips on How to Improve the Writing Process for Multi-Language Learner (MLL) Students**

**York College – Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) Program**

**Question:** Higher education can have more than one purpose. But if you had to choose one main goal, what would that be?

1. Jam pack knowledge into the student’s brain
2. See who is smart and who is not, and grade accordingly
3. Test who can study countless hours
4. Improve the student’s capacity to learn new information and enhance their creative potential

I am hoping you chose **D**. If you have, great!

But when English is not a first, or even second or third, language for students in your classes, lack of fluency can seem a barrier to this goal. And not keeping student struggles with language acquisition in mind can lead, unintentionally, to students being excluded from the academic endeavor of learning and intellectual creativity. If you are someone for whom English is also not a first language, you may understand very intimately the difficulties your students face. If you are a native English speaker, consider how alien Academic English can sound even to some native speakers: A lecture on *Quantum Mechanics* or *Transgression and Subversive Performativity,* for example, quickly becomes opaque without a working understanding of the speaker's vocabulary!

Language acquisition, like an understanding of quantum mechanics, takes time; moreover, students can be at different stages regardless of their background. Their level of comprehension can be independent from what they know and constrained by external factors. Additionally, there are numerous ways to ‘understand’ and ‘create’. This is valid not only for MLL students but also for native speakers as well.

As a professor, some concerns might come immediately to mind: "I'd love to help MLL students, **but I don't teach language or writing classes:** what can I do?**"** Or **"**Won't focusing on MLL students **take time away** from the content I am teaching?**"**

Fortunately, **small shifts in your teaching can make an immense difference in facilitating MLL student's learning.** The strategies included here involve tweaks to lecturing and writing assignments, as well as tips for encouraging more participation, that can be easily and quickly incorporated into your classroom and assignments.

And these strategies are not only for MLL students. They work for everyone. As Vivian Zamel observes in her seminal essay on ESL pedagogy, "Learning how to better address the needs of ESL students, because it involves becoming more reflective about teaching, because it involves carefully thinking through the expectations, values, and assumptions underlying the work we assign, helps faculty teach everyone better. In other words, rather than seeing the implications of inclusion and diversity in opposition to excellence and academic standards...learning to teach ESL students challenges us to reconceptualize teaching and thus contributes to and enhances learning for all students."[[1]](#footnote-1)

**Keep in mind.** It is hard to separate the writing from the learning process, and vice versa. The added value to an MLL student’s work starts in the classroom and reaches beyond the day grades are posted. In order to contribute to this intellectual process, we cannot leave the student alone and treat writing as an isolated and lonely process. Instead, we should view it as an interaction between the professor and the student, whether it is in the classroom during the discussion of the material or during office hours when the student is asking for comments on an idea.

**In the Classroom**

1. Understanding the Lecture and the Material
   1. ***Outline of the Lecture****:* If you are new in a foreign city, having a map REALLY helps when you are lost. A **lecture outline can be a map** for an MLL student who is lost during a lecture, especially if it defines important vocabulary.
   2. ***Emphasizing Critical Terms and Concepts****:* In case an MLL student **does not know which words or concepts you emphasize** when you lecture, just write them on the board. You can also explicitly note important points ("this is important" "write this down"), and repeat them for emphasis, to give students time to process and write them down. This makes note-taking and comprehension easier. Also this is useful if they are not familiar with the pronunciation of a specific, and critical, word.
   3. ***Listeners vs. Readers and the Visual Folk:*** During the learning process, some prefer listening whereas others favor seeing a picture. Some learn better by reading and others have an easier time with videos. **Combine them!** Help everyone.
   4. ***Providing Alternatives for Convoluted and Difficult-to-Understand Vocabulary****:* Few MLL students may encounter the word ‘amalgamation’ or ‘conspicuous’ in their daily lives. When you use words that they might not understand, **insert a simpler alternative**. This will allow them to understand the lecture and maybe even learn a new word! Alternately, use the moment to ask students if they know what the word means. Both are useful for checking students' comprehension, non-native and native English speaker alike.

“The Congress is an amalgamation, or combination, of the House of Representatives and the Senate” or “The influence World War I left in Hemingway’s work is very conspicuous, or very visible”.

On a similar note, be aware of slang, idioms, and cultural references: try to stop to check for comprehension when you use them.

* 1. ***Lecture on "how-tos" of understanding lectures:*** It may seem obvious that words like "first," "next," and "last" indicate that you are listing important points, or that "as a side note" implies that the information is less crucial to write down. However, on the meta-level, it can be immensely useful to make lecture and note-taking "cues" like these transparent, via a worksheet (such as this one: <http://resources.jjay.cuny.edu/erc/tutoring/pdfs/5.pdf>) or even a lecture early in the semester on the basics of gleaning essential information from lectures
  2. ***Finally, take breaks!***: As you go through your lecture, take the time to pause for questions, build in comprehension checks, and repeat/rephrase key information throughout. These kinds of pauses not only allow you to check in on students' understanding, but also give time for non-native English speakers who are absorbing both language and content to "catch up."

1. Participation

While it is sometimes true that MLL students are reluctant to participate because they come from academic cultures where participation is not expected or encouraged, it is also often the case that students have second language acquisition anxieties. Below are some strategies for encouraging participation and assuaging those anxieties.

* 1. ***Collect a "language information sheet" on the first class day:*** On this sheet, include questions like, "Do you speak/read/write more than one language?" "What are concerns/difficulties you encounter while writing, including grammar?" "What kinds of writing/speaking have you been assigned previously, whether in the American school system or another country's school system?" "How confident do you feel speaking English? What factors make it easier?" This sheet will not only provide you with useful information about your students, but it will also signal that your classroom is an empathetic, "low-stakes" space where they won't be judged for being a non-native speaker/writer, and where discussion of language-learning is welcome

* 1. ***Provide a response time:***We sometimes ask questions to facilitate discussion. If we choose the student **whose hand immediately goes up**, then we have robbed those who needed a while to think. MLL students can take longer to construct a response. Don’t be afraid of **an awkward silence:** practice waiting at least 3 seconds after any question you ask. Wait until others can come up with what they want to say. Alternately, provide longer response times via in-class writing/groupwork exercises that give all students time to process: think-pair-share is a common class exercise that allows individuals to write down a response to a question or prompt ("think") and to share that response with a neighbor ("pair") as a confidence-building "practice round" for class discussion, making full class discussion the last step in the process ("share"), after students have formulated and practiced responses.
  2. ***Providing discussion topics prior to class:*** Ask your students to bring in discussion topics. Or provide them prior to class. This way, MLL students can be **ready to talk** about the discussion topics. This can increase participation.
  3. ***Refer to student experiences:*** If the student feels **intimidated** because of his/her English, then lack of content to discuss makes it twice difficult to participate. Ask for them to give examples from their own experiences, other countries, or topics with which they are more familiar.
  4. ***Make conversation cues explicit:*** For many native speakers, the phrases people use to enter into conversations seem obvious: they may not be so obvious for non-native English speaking students. List on the board, or make a handout of, common phrases for entering class discussion that MLL students can refer to ("I want to add to what Ky said...," "I agree/disagree with Betsy because...").
  5. ***Paraphrase what students say back to them:*** "When you say that, do you mean X?" "Are you trying to say Y?" Questions like these allow students to clarify further, and hear their words reflected back to them in a different way.
  6. ***Make your classroom multilingual:*** Have your MLL students build on their strengths, and boost their own confidence, by encouraging them to use their native language(s) to help their understanding of content. Encourage students during in-class writing to write in their native language(s) as well as English, in order to break down some of the "writer's block" that may stem from feeling like they don't have the "vocabulary" to write their answer the way they would want in English. You might also encourage MLL students to share, in groupwork and class discussion, what the equivalent of certain key terms and vocabulary would be in their native language(s).

**The Writing Process**

1. Detailed and Clear Assignment Prompts

Assume that no one has ever written a paper the way you want it. In some cases, MLL students have different norms about what constitutes a good paper. For instance, in certain Asian cultures, a good paper is a ‘good patchwork’ of well-published scholars. Original student arguments are discouraged.

Some prefer long and vague introductions. Others prefer the argument in the conclusion paragraph. DO NOT expect your MLL students to know **the norms of American academia**—or even, in fact, that native English speaking students themselves are totally fluent in academic norms.

Provide a detailed handout about your expectations and include a grading rubric. In that handout, be as clear as possible with your "action verbs" and what you mean by them: you may know what you mean by a term like "discuss," but your students might need some more guidance in class. Scan your handout for idioms ("thinking-through"), slang, cultural references and compound words and phrasing ("performance appraisal" "nature of learning") that might be confusing for non-native English speakers; if you include them, make a point of explaining what they mean in class, or of making students paraphrase them back to you; as with lectures, you might also make a point of writing next to difficult phrases/words a simpler alternative or definition.

Something helpful to include in assignment prompts—and actively teach—are templates that include useful grammatical phrases/word groupings and figures of speech.

"Through an analysis of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, [Name] reveals \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_"

*(allows the instructor to emphasize the need to include the preposition "of")*

"Although it may seem true that \_\_\_\_\_\_\_, it is necessary to take into account \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_."

*(allows the instructor to emphasize "that" as well as the idiom "take into account")*

1. Scaffolding

If you expect your students to turn in their final work the last day of classes without any feedback mechanism, the outcome will not necessarily be what you want. Divide it into manageable pieces so they get to receive feedback along the way and they do not leave it all to the last day.

* 1. ***Discussing Ideas Prior to Writing:***Help them create ideas. Point out what is doable and what is not. By **confirming their ideas before they start writing**, you make the process of writing less alien and scary. Note that some of what might keep a student "stuck" is a sense that they lack the vocabulary to express what they mean: a useful exercise from writing tutor Kevin Dvorak is the alphabet brainstorming exercise.[[2]](#footnote-2) In class, for homework, or in office hours, ask a student to write out all the letters of the alphabet and then, next to as many of the letters as possible, to write words/themes/phrases that begin with each letter related to the topic they're working on for their assignment. This exercise builds confidence for the next step by helping students generate the vocabulary they need to start writing an outline and draft.
  2. ***Expectations and Sample Works:*** Providing a few examples of what kind of work you expect them to produce can help. But remember to take the second step of walking through these examples to point out what worked about them, and why; otherwise, students may not know what, exactly, you want them to emulate from these models.
  3. ***Drafts as a Feedback Mechanism:*** Require them to turn in at least one draft. This will allow them to communicate with you about their writing. Encouraging them to talk to you about their papers might not get the response you want, especially if the MLL student has little faith in their work. They rather postpone the unpleasant outcome. **Don’t let this happen!** If they produce a preliminary version of their paper, they have to listen to you comment on their paper. Remind them: unpleasant now beats unpleasant grades later.
  4. ***Teaching common phrases in a discipline:*** We often speak and write in "bundles" of words within a discipline: "drop in revenue," "treat an illness," "highly significant." Reflect on what some of these phrases are in your discipline, and then teach these commonly linked words or include them as examples in your assignments, keeping in mind that they aren't necessarily linked in MLL students' minds. Having these phrases on hand may also alleviate some anxiety for students surrounding generating language, and may make the writing a bit less stressful.

1. Citations as a Foreign Language

Citing is not a big part of writing for some cultures. In fact, copying verbatim may mean respect for the original author in your student’s mind. They are not trying to trick you. They are simply unaware of how citations work around here. Make sure to explain **why they should cite**. Provide **a handout** for your preferred citation methods. These are often available in Writing Centers and online.

1. Grammar vs. the Content
   1. ***Priorities:***Your MLL student is aware that his/her English is not perfect. Handing back a draft that is covered in red ink correcting every misplaced comma and every misspelled word is only intimidating him/her. **Prioritize!** Is this the first draft? Then content might be the primary concern.

This does not mean ignore the grammar problems. But you are not there to teach Grammar 101. So what can you do?

* 1. ***The Patterns of Error:***See if there are any major patterns of grammatical error. If the student has several subject-verb agreement problems, you could circle one or two and add a final comment referring to that as something with which he/she could be more careful. Point students to online grammar resources or self-instructing worksheets that address this particular pattern (or provide Google search terms that would help them find these resources). You might also advise them to go to the Writing Center to discuss these patterns (how to identify and fix them) with a tutor.
  2. ***Global Vs. Local Errors***: Also consider prioritizing **global** rather than **local** patterns of error: a global error interferes with a reader's understanding of the writing's message, whereas a local error does not (for example, a missing article in the sentence "Many Americans face problem of discrimination" does not mess with its overall meaning).

1. Office Hours

We’ve all been there. Countless office hours where no one shows up. Encourage your MLL students to come. Even maybe attach a part of their final paper grade to this. Speaking with you in person will alleviate some of the anxiety associated with talking, and making mistakes, in front of their classmates.

This provides an opportunity for you to notice problems before the paper is turned in.

1. Online Resources

While this brochure provides some strategies to start with, you may want more information, or to address some issues this brochure does not cover. Here are some online resources you can look to for more information (many of these links can be found online at the York WAC Writing Fellows website, under "Multiple Language Learners":

John Jay College and Queensborough Community College Faculty Resources for Teaching Non-Native Speakers at CUNY: <http://resources.jjay.cuny.edu/erc/faculty/understanding.php>

Tips on Teaching ESOL Students from University of North Carolina: <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/faculty-resources/tips-on-teaching-esl-students/tips-on-teaching-esl-students/>

Working with Non-Native English Speakers from Boise State University: <https://ctl.boisestate.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/LinguisticInclusStrats.pdf>

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1. Zamel, Vivian. "Strangers in the Academia: The Experiences of Faculty and ESOL Students Across the Curriculum." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 46, no. 4, 1995, pp. 518-519. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dvorak, Kevin. "Writing Activities for ESL Writers." *ESL Writers: A Guide for Writing Center Tutors*, *2nd edition,* edited by Shanti Bruce and Ben Rafoth. Boynton/Cook Publishers, 2009, 176-185 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)