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Metaphors We Teach By: Transforming Stereotypes of ESL Writers

■ In a time of political correctness universities strive to appear inclusive and accepting, but the metaphors some professors use to characterize ESL writers suggest that less tolerant attitudes lie below the surface. I recently heard a university professor say, “Do what you can to clean up the ESLs [students] so that when they get up to me they can write a decent essay.” It is no coincidence that she speaks of a time when these students get “up” to her course level. This kind of unconscious use of an exclusionary metaphor is typical in some universities where content faculty perceive of ESL students’ writing issues as being outside the realm of their responsibility. Some metaphors I have heard characterize ESL writers as aberrant “outsiders” who do not belong to the academic mainstream, or as sick “patients” who are unfit for college writing. This article examines both the causes and effects of such negative metaphors, and it suggests ways that content faculty might collaborate with ESL specialists to better support second language writers. This article also proposes a more positive metaphor, one that characterizes an ESL writer’s development in terms of “growth.”

Stereotypes that some university professors use to describe ESL writing students can

affect the quality of instruction the students receive. In *Metaphors We Live By*, Lakoff and Johnson (2003) have shown that metaphors structure our perceptions and understanding. Consider what happens when a conversation is conducted through metaphors of war: “I am going to *attack* his position and *demolish* his defenses.” How does this kind of language structure the perceptions and understanding two people have of one another during a discussion? Consider an even more extreme case. What happens in a casual conversation when all members of an ethnic group are labeled “terrorists”? The ability to have insight into the lives of those who appear different from us is diminished. Just as there are metaphors we live by, there are metaphors we teach by. As such, disparaging characterizations of ESL writers limit the ability to perceive, understand, and teach these learners. This article argues that language about language teaching is significant. In a time of political correctness universities strive to appear inclusive and accepting, but the metaphors some professors use to characterize ESL writers suggest that less tolerant attitudes lie below the surface.

Stereotypes of ESL Writers in Universities

Content faculty and ESL professors who understand that acquiring a second language takes time can be more sympathetically aware of the challenges ESL students face when learning to write. Therefore, they speak of these writers in terms of their “growth” or development. I recently heard an ESL professor describe an immigrant student this way: “She is making a new life here, essay by essay.” The choice of words in this statement reveals that the teacher perceives of the student as growing “essay by essay.” Such a view facilitates learning because it is informed by the understanding that ESL students develop writing skills through extensive practice, gradually growing into better writers through time. However, not all content professors receive training in teaching ESL writing, and this may prevent them from being as helpful

as they want to be. It may also help explain the existence of negative metaphors. For example, I have sometimes heard content faculty characterize ESL students in language that reveals they do not accurately perceive the needs of these learners. In the two most prevalent metaphors, students are described as terminally sick “patients” on the one hand, and as unwanted, aberrant “outsiders” on the other.

“Should I Send Them for Tutoring or X-Rays?”

ESL writers in universities are sometimes characterized in language that makes them appear to be sick “patients.” The danger in this is that the way we assess a student’s “condition” will determine the kind of “remedy” we offer (Palmer, 1998). In the case of ESL writers, one must be careful about the language used to describe their condition, or the ability to choose an effective remedy may become limited. For example, I once heard a history professor say: “I don’t know if I should send them [ESL writing students] for tutoring or for X-rays.” Such illness metaphors can limit a professor’s ability to clearly apprehend how to help a student writer. Moreover, they can have a stigmatizing effect. All university departments need to understand ESL writers as learners engaged in a normal, developmental process. At present, though, some tend to view these students as unfit, which negatively affects how they are taught. For example, a philosophy professor characterized one ESL writer this way: “He needs fixing. His grammar is no better than he is.” At the very least, this leads to a short-term “fixing” mentality: The student’s essay has grammatical inaccuracies; fix the grammar and the student is fixed. Unfortunately, isolated instruction in grammar has little effect on the development of writing skills (Leki, 1992), and taking such an approach does not help the student.

But, this is only one of the misconceptions about ESL writers that affect instruction. There is also insufficient recognition of the fact that second language acquisition is a long-term process, that ESL students cannot

be expected to learn to write with native-speaker ability within a short semester. I once overheard an economics professor saying: “These kids [ESL writers] just don’t have what it takes to write a sentence. There is no teaching them.” Here, a misunderstanding about the time it takes a learner to acquire a second language leads to his or her being unfairly labeled as incurably deficient and therefore inherently unteachable.

For too long, ESL writers have been misperceived as lesser students, and as learners who have “things wrong with them” (Shaughnessy, 1977). Such a limiting view needs to be replaced with one that more accurately perceives who these writers are and how their needs can best be addressed. We can begin by transforming negative stereotypes into more accurate characterizations. For example, if content faculty understood that it takes time to acquire a second language, they might view ESL students as developing writers who deserve their support rather than as intrinsically defective ones unworthy of their attention.

“These People Can’t Do English”

ESL writers in universities are sometimes also characterized in language that makes them appear to be “outsiders,” and this reflects the way such students are treated in some schools. That is, sufficient support to help them develop writing skills is not always provided. In these instances, when a professor says “ESL,” it can sound pejorative, as in: “Oh, he’s ESL.” I recently heard a sociology professor say, “Do what you can to clean up the ESLs [students] so that when they get up to me they can write a decent essay.” Here “ESL” is a euphemism for students who are viewed as outsiders or aberrant. It is no coincidence that she speaks of a time when these students get “up” to her course level. This kind of unconscious use of an exclusionary metaphor is typical in some universities where content faculty perceive ESL students’ writing issues as being outside the realm of their responsibility. Similarly, some content professors

speak of sending ESL students “out” to remedial writing courses; that is, they perceive of these students as “outsiders” who are not part of the university. I recently heard an English professor say in exasperation: “*These people* [ESL students] can’t do English.” The language in this quote carries the sense that ESL writers are an intractable social problem—the poor who will never be admitted into the mainstream. Such language is indicative of an intolerant climate in which ESL writers are less likely to receive the support they need. This is by no means an isolated problem. In fact, the number of ESL students in universities is growing while the support for them continues to fall short (Matsuda, 1998).

“Send Us Healthy Patients So We Can Look Like Good Doctors”

Why aren’t universities doing more to support ESL writers? Why aren’t content faculty helping these students when they appear in their courses? One has the impression that both are really saying: “Don’t send us any more sick people—we don’t know what to do with them. Send us healthy patients so we can look like good doctors” (Palmer, 1998). Universities have long resisted taking on the responsibility for teaching writing skills, partly because they do not want to incur the financial burden and partly because their mission does not include the teaching of academic literacy skills. In the case of university English departments, it has been suggested that they deemphasize the study of literature and elevate the instruction of writing to address the needs of students, many of whom require improved writing skills to succeed in their careers (Scholes, 1998). Analogously, to help ESL writers, university departments in general may need to widen their purview to include both content instruction and writing instruction.

As for content professors’ reluctance to help ESL writers, several factors are at work. A few do not want to get their hands dirty: “I don’t know how you *stand it*,” a drama professor told me not long ago. Many, though, would

like to help. So why do they hesitate? A low tolerance for writing errors is one reason. Some professors read an essay diagnostically, focusing on grammatical accuracy rather than on how to help a student develop an idea (Kasper, 2001). When this is the case, the teacher’s need for correctness conflicts with an ESL student’s tendency to make errors while writing. In other words, a teacher may not realize that he needs to allow an ESL student the opportunity to write several drafts of a paper, because the first few drafts may require revision and editing before the student can write a more grammatically correct final draft. Thus, professors’ low tolerance for error and related reluctance to teach ESL writers stem from misconceptions about how students learn to write. Specifically, some believe students should *already* have learned how to write by the time they arrive in the professors’ classes. This grows out of a common misconception of what is possible in first-year writing courses. Research has shown that writing cannot be taught just once such that students can then write effectively ever after (Carroll, 2002). Some teachers, however, do not recognize that writing is a developmental skill that requires many years of practice or that students need composition instruction *throughout* their academic careers, not just when they are freshmen.

ESL Writing Consultants

University departments would do well to employ ESL professors as writing consultants to work with content teachers. With the addition of nonnative speakers in their courses, teachers are finding that their job descriptions now also include the teaching of writing. “What do I do with *this one*?” a psychology professor recently asked me in a tone conveying both resentment and anxiety. She was seeking advice on how to help an ESL writer in her course. She said she was feeling resentful about having to address writing issues in a content course and anxious about her own ability to meet this student’s needs. Complicating matters is the fact that teaching

writing requires a different pedagogical approach. Writing is a skill and not a body of knowledge that can be transmitted via lecture or conveyed through Socratic dialogue. Those trained in a particular field are sometimes nonplussed when confronted with the challenges of working with an ESL writer. Teaching a skill takes more time. For example, responding to ESL writing is more labor-intensive and often requires the teacher to meet one-to-one with the student. However, ESL colleagues can demonstrate the value of taking the extra time to help students to revise. Also, they can explain that revision is a complex practice with few pat answers: A first draft can present a wide range of writing issues, and even a revised paper may have recurring errors. Some professors may not be as familiar or comfortable with the inherently interpersonal nature of teaching writing (particularly writing responses on multiple drafts and meeting for one-to-one conferences) as they are with a transmission model of teaching content via lecture. Here again, ESL professors can lend a helpful perspective and suggest alternative classroom strategies. At other times, a professor may be dismayed by how little improvement she notes in a student's writing, and this is an instance where a second language professor colleague's familiarity with ESL composition theory might prove useful. A shift in perspective is needed so that content faculty recognize ESL students develop writing skills through time; that the results, the payoff, will likely not come at the end of a single paper or even a whole semester.

Overcoming Negative Stereotypes of ESL Writing Professors

Before ESL writing professors can be a resource for content faculty, however, the perception of them needs to change. The work of basic writing teachers in general is not respected in academe, and it has been likened to "janitorial cleanup or service work" (Sommers, 2003), while the teaching of ESL writing is viewed as having "handmaid sta-

tus" (Benesch, 1992). These perceptions persist: Not long ago, an ESL writing professor was introduced at a university meeting as "our ESL specialist: the guy who empties the bedpans around here." Those of us in ESL writing sense there is a hierarchy in which the teaching of a skill is less valued than the teaching of a specific content. Even the course numbers tell us so, with the "lower" numbers accorded to ESL writing courses. Content teachers tend to privilege reading over writing (Elbow, 2002), and this is perhaps even more the case with ESL writing. In this sense, some professors may think that doing the same work as ESL writing professors is not their job. Matsuda (1998) has suggested that such a "division of labor" exists even within composition departments, where the needs of ESL writers are sometimes viewed as not within the scope of a native-speaker composition course teacher's responsibilities. For ESL writing professors to be of use, they must first be seen as equal partners engaged in the valuable work of teaching ESL writers in the university.

ESL Students in the Academy: An Unwelcome Presence

While nonnative speakers have been in universities far too long for them to be perceived as "strangers in the academy" (Zamel, 1998), they continue to be seen as a temporary and unwelcome presence. They are marginalized even when they make up a sizable portion of the student population, and even when their tuition is what enables some university departments to survive (Crowley, 1998). I recently attended a university meeting where a spreadsheet of enrollment was distributed; it represented only native-speaker students and made no mention of ESL students, even though the latter constituted an equal number. When this was pointed out, an administrator replied: "Do we really have that many ESL students?" The implication is that ESL writers remain under the radar in the academy. The result is that they are admitted and their tuition is collected, but not enough

support is provided to ensure they learn the writing skills they need to become bona fide graduates and fully productive employees in the future. Given current budget constraints, funding for ESL writing instruction is unlikely to improve. What can improve is the quality of writing instruction provided to ESL students by content faculty in all departments.

“Growth”: A Metaphor for ESL Writers and Those Who Teach Them

One needs to avoid stereotypes that hinder the ability to perceive and understand not only students but also colleagues. “Argument as War” is a common metaphor, according to Lakoff and Johnson’s *Metaphors We Live By* (2003), but the aim here is not to “win” the war between teaching content and teaching writing or to “attack” content faculty. Instead, the need is to come together to achieve a common goal—supporting the development of ESL writers. Ideally, a more positive metaphor is called for, one of “growth.” Here ESL writers could be perceived and understood in terms of their ongoing development, which occurs gradually through time. In this metaphor, every stage of growth along the way would be perceived as honorable, and the work of ESL professors, and content faculty, who promote this growth would be perceived as similarly honorable. In addition, “growth” would also describe the ongoing development of content professors as they gradually expand their instructor’s repertoire to include the teaching of ESL composition.

Of course, in a time when universities have become a business, it is idealistic to think that institutions will soon reverse their current policies regarding ESL writing students. Similarly, it is unrealistic to expect that content professors will quickly change the metaphors they teach by. Still, it is important for us as ESL professionals to be aware of language about language teaching and to continue to work toward transforming negative stereotypes of ESL writers and of those dedicated to teaching them.

Author

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