

UC Berkeley

The CATESOL Journal

Title

Mainstream English Teachers Working With Nonnative Speakers: How Well Prepared Are They?

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9fs2z2r5>

Journal

The CATESOL Journal, 24(1)

ISSN

1535-0517

Author

Anderson, Chris

Publication Date

2013

DOI

10.5070/B5.36160

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed



Mainstream English Teachers Working With Nonnative Speakers: How Well Prepared Are They?

The number of nonnative English speakers and Generation 1.5 students enrolled in mainstream English classes continues to grow, especially in community colleges in California and other western states. Yet most English teachers with degrees in Literature, Creative Writing, or even Composition have not been trained in TOESL and often feel underprepared to work with these students and the specific language and grammar problems they bring into the classroom. A recent study focused on the overall preparedness level of new community college Composition instructors provided some interesting data in this regard, illuminating the unique challenge community college teachers face in the increasingly multicultural and multilingual reality of today's mainstream English classes, which are most often not designed with ESL students in mind.

Because community colleges offer an affordable and accessible educational option to people of all kinds, their student populations are often quite culturally, linguistically, and socioeconomically diverse. ESL students are, of course, a large part of this demographic, especially in western states such as California. Many of the English teachers who work with ESL students in Composition classes have training in composition, literature, or creative writing rather than TESOL. This phenomenon of ESL students enrolled in mainstream Composition classes taught by non-TOESL-trained teachers is most often seen in transfer-level classes, to which all academically oriented ESL students will eventually advance. But what happens when teachers who earn MAs in Literature, Creative Writing, or even Composition encounter students with the multicultural and multilingual backgrounds of ESL students? Are they prepared for the challenges these students bring into the classroom? Do they have the knowledge and training to integrate them into a class primarily made up of native English speakers?

During my last semester as a graduate student at a large, urban university on the West Coast, I conducted a study that examined how well new teachers, recent graduates of an English Composition Master's Program, evaluated their own preparation for careers as mainstream English and Composition in-

structors. Their level of preparedness (or lack thereof) to effectively teach the large numbers of ESL students encountered in their mainstream English classes came up repeatedly throughout the study. For these new teachers, the impact of multilingual and multicultural students on a mainstream Composition class was significant, illustrating that while these new teachers were prepared to expect a multicultural and multilingual environment in their classrooms, they did not always feel armed to handle the challenge of a hugely diverse student population, including integrating the needs of native speakers with those of ESL students.

I interviewed 11 teachers, asking them to evaluate their own preparedness as new Composition instructors. All were recent graduates of an MA Program in Composition, and all had taught at least one Composition class at the community college or developmental level. The interviews averaged about an hour in length and touched on multiple topics. All respondents were, in general, very satisfied with the education they received in the MA program, saying that they were well prepared to teach Composition at the community college level. However, two issues arose repeatedly in our interviews that affected all of our researched topic areas and led to mismatches between the MA program's preparatory goals and the reality of the experience of its graduates. Those were:

1. The large numbers of ESL/bilingual students whose reading and writing abilities, as evaluated by the respondents, were not on par with those of their peers; and
2. The perceived disconnect between the grammar pedagogy philosophy within the MA program and the needs of community college students, including ESL students enrolled in mainstream Composition classes.

Working With a Highly Diverse Student Population

The MA program I studied has, as part of its ethos, the idea that all students, no matter how low their current level of writing ability, are capable of using writing to exhibit and participate in high-level thinking. However, the study's respondents thought that lessons or assignments designed for Freshman Composition students enrolled at a university were often not as effective for developmental students enrolled at a community college. Additionally, they were surprised to find themselves facing a multilingual/multicultural student population far more diverse in skill level than the "idealized" population they were trained to teach. Despite the many opportunities of the study's respondents to practice lesson design, course design, and assessment while students in their graduate program, including the opportunity for most of these same graduate students to actually teach a class at their university as a graduate teaching assistant, many found that they were not prepared for dealing with the variety and severity of language issues brought into the community college classroom.

They were equally surprised by the depth and breadth of the community college's diversity, in general. All of the graduate students I interviewed were prepared in some theoretical way to expect and honor racial and cultural diversity. But when they actually got in the classroom, they found that diversity

was a much bigger thing. It can mean an older returning immigrant student. It can mean a newly arrived international student. It can mean students who have been through the local school systems but who were never flagged as ESL, their low reading and writing levels largely a result of not getting the special ESL support they needed. The stark reality of community college diversity was so much larger than the respondents expected and were trained to handle that they often felt overwhelmed. And, of course, the diversity was directly reflected in their students' reading and writing abilities, which were often very much lower than the respondents expected or were prepared to handle, regardless of reason.

Perhaps the most significant diversity-based issue alumni faced was the large number of unexpected ESL students in their classrooms. Despite the fact that none of the alumni were teaching or had taught ESL-specific classes, all were put in a position in which working with these students in much larger numbers than expected, and teaching those students in conjunction with native English speakers, was the norm. Even though teachers were prepared to expect diversity (and indeed most welcomed it) they were not prepared for the number of ESL students enrolled in their mainstream Composition classes. As one respondent said about ESL and Generation 1.5 students,

Technically, I'm not supposed to have those students, but of course I have those students all the time. ... That is probably the biggest gap for me as well because I'm not trained how to teach those students, how to correct those errors.

ESL and Generation 1.5 Students in the Composition Classroom

No subject created more frustration for the respondents than the teaching of grammar, and no subject was brought up more often in the interviews or presented more apparent mismatches between new teachers' training and their teaching experiences than grammar. The overwhelming consensus among the respondents was that most of their frustrations in teaching grammar had to do with teaching these ESL or Generation 1.5 students enrolled in mainstream Composition classes. Repeatedly, the respondents explained that their preparation in the teaching of grammar left them underprepared to deal with the severity of the grammar issues they faced. As one respondent said,

Most of my students are bilingual or they might be Gen 1.5. Many of them have much more profound issues with grammar. It's hard, because their issues are different. ... It's one of the issues where I strive to do better.

Another alumna says about her preparation to teach grammar in the MA program, "It's not emphasized, but it's like the elephant in the room; it's one of the biggest problems." Another went so far as to say about the way the teaching of grammar was approached in the graduate program: "Grammar was almost a forbidden subject in the program. ... Nobody would touch grammar, but you know, you have to do some of that. ... You have to deal with grammar in the classroom."

It is important to note that a significant anti-grammar ideology exists in mainstream MA Composition programs. Grammar has not been a major part of the scholarship of Composition for quite some time; hardly anything has been published on this topic for the last 20 years. However, in the last 50 years, much has been published in support of limiting the direct teaching of grammar. As far back as 1963, Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, and Schoer said, “The teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing” (pp. 37-38). Rather, the main thrust of Composition grammar pedagogy is that, because much of a writer’s knowledge of grammar is socially constructed, a conscious understanding of grammar is not the most important factor in becoming a strong academic writer. Grammar is taught in the context of student writing, and only as much as is necessary for editing. This is certainly a good thing because it takes teachers away from the old-school drill-and-skill mentality, an approach that could arguably be called “drill-and-kill” because it can easily kill any desire a student might have to use writing as an intellectual endeavor. Further, the drill-and-skill method certainly neglects to show students the cognitive path that will lead them to deeper and more critical thinking. While this *laissez-faire* approach to teaching grammar may benefit native English speakers (especially those in basic writing classes), it certainly hurts bilingual/ESL/multilingual students. Composition teachers not trained to teach grammar face a daunting task when confronted with ESL students whose foundation of English language usage is lacking the socially constructed knowledge of their native-speaking peers.

Filling the Gaps

This clash of Composition’s anti-grammar philosophy with severely grammar-challenged ESL students led to significant frustration for the novice teachers represented in this study. To further their understanding of grammar pedagogy, especially for the purpose of teaching the unexpected numbers of ESL students in their mainstream Composition classes, but also for the benefit of severely grammar-challenged native English speakers, many of the respondents reached out to TOESL-trained colleagues, whom they thought were much better prepared to teach grammar. As one respondent said, “I have a friend who went through the TOESL program at the same time that I was doing the Comp. program, and he seems to be much better at talking about grammar than I learned how to be.” Another said,

I have a friend ... she took ... an ESL grammar class. ... I kind of look up to her in some ways because I feel like she is more prepared to teach grammar and help students with grammar than I am in a lot of ways.

Other alumni sought more extensive knowledge of grammar through books and other resources. One said, “Now I’m having to go back and really just learn all this stuff on my own.”

Despite the indifferent approach to grammar in Composition’s current

scholarship, 10 of the 11 alumni interviewed had taken a course (since discontinued) that focused on native speaker-oriented stylistic and grammatical issues. The course was not in any way rooted in nonnative-speaker grammar issues, but every respondent who took the course was grateful that he or she had at least had something to start with. Although 9 of the 11 interviewees responded that they felt underprepared to teach grammar to mainstreamed ESL students at the community college level, many felt better prepared than their peers, and most attributed this fact to having taken this discontinued course. They found that even though the course did not specifically address how to teach grammar to ESL students (or native speakers, for that matter), having a deeper understanding of sentence structure gave them some ammunition for dealing with the often profound grammar issues faced by their students. More than one respondent suggested that a modified version of this course, one that focused not only on grammar knowledge but grammar pedagogy, should again become a part of the MA program's curriculum. Specifically, alumni suggested that this course have an ESL bent, that its pedagogy be based in TOESL scholarship. Their experiences as frustrated new teachers, forced to reach out to the TOESL community in order to gain the skills and knowledge they felt lacking in their own preparation, prompted the suggestion that such a class might better prepare them to meet the challenges presented by the unexpected numbers of ESL students they are charged to teach.

Conclusion

All of the alumni interviewed for this study were very satisfied with the education they received as students in their graduate program. This was in large part because, as graduate students, their ideas and opinions were valued by their peers, their professors, and the program as a whole. Students in this MA program felt a part of the process, in charge of their own educations. They were not force-fed a list of prescribed lessons or indoctrinated into the idea that good grammar and good writing were the same thing. In fact, quite the opposite was true. Not only were the alumni of this program valued as budding scholars, but they were taught to value their own students the same way. It is a classic case of "paying-it-forward," a chain of respect that all of the alumni I interviewed appreciated so deeply and continue to promote to this day. The professors in the program valued their students' ideas, who, in turn, value theirs. The core of this approach is that every student has a voice, and that using his or her voice to participate in the academic conversation comes first—before correct spelling, before comma rules. Thankfully, the field of Composition has moved away from the idea of remediation, that students are not allowed to meaningfully participate in academia until they show that they can master the finer points of grammar and usage. This should never change.

However, without the tools to help students (especially those who do not have an inherent understanding of grammar) use writing to communicate effectively, Composition and mainstream English teachers will be frustrated in their attempts to guide these students. Today's reality is that mainstream community college Composition classes are, in a sense, ESL classes. In the field of

Composition, especially in California, everybody is going to be an ESL teacher of one kind or another. Teachers who are trained in Composition, Literature, or Creative Writing go into shock when they realize that their Basic Writing course and their transfer-level Freshman Composition courses are filled with ESL and Generation 1.5 students. It is faced with this reality when new Composition teachers feel at a loss. The training ground of the university, while diverse in its own right, pales in comparison to the diversity of the community colleges. Composition teachers, no matter their background, would be well served to include ESL-oriented grammar courses as part of their training.

But beyond serving the needs of ESL students directly, I would propose that this type of training for new community college teachers would also benefit native English-speaking Composition students. While most of the serious language issues alluded to in this study were a result of ESL and Generation 1.5 students' enrolling in mainstream Composition classes, not all were. I can attest from my own experience that the facility with grammar of some native English-speaking college freshman can be appallingly low. Tools to help these students are available, many of them ready and waiting in TOESL classrooms. Having intimate knowledge of these tools and a willingness to use them does not remove a Composition teacher from the core goal of giving an academic voice to any student of any level. In fact, it can only help achieve that goal. While certainly, if the emphasis of Composition starts to move back toward grammar, there is the danger of a return to the "bareness of Current-Traditional Rhetoric" (Berlin, 1987, p. 28) that so many of us detest. However, as in all things, balance is the key. As one alumnus asked, "How do you embed sentence-level instruction within the Composition class when you have so many higher-order outcomes to address?" Our challenge, as both Composition and ESL teachers, is to find this balance, to make sure a student's voice is valued, regardless of his or her current skill with written language, while at the same time providing him or her with the opportunity to develop this voice through consistent improvement in the understanding of English usage.

Author

Chris Anderson is an assistant professor of English at Sierra Nevada College, a private 4-year liberal arts college near the shores of Lake Tahoe in Incline Village, Nevada. Chris teaches all levels of Freshman Composition, including ESL. He is especially interested in making sure each of his students participates in genuine academic discussions through writing. You can see (and comment on) work from his latest class at the student-driven blog <http://www.sierranevadachronicles.com>.

References

- Berlin, J. (1987). *Rhetoric and reality: Writing instruction in American colleges 1900-1985*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Braddock, R., Lloyd-Jones, R., & Schoer, L. (1963). *Research in written composition*. Urbana, IL: NCTE.