Supporting ELL Writers in the Disciplines: Themes and Strategies for Instructors

In a "Writing Across the Curriculum" (WAC) setting, writing instruction occurs throughout the disciplines. Typically, no single course attempts to fully develop student writers "once and for all." Instead, every class is proposed to contribute to the continued growth of student writers across a variety of diverse fields. This may reflect two core assumptions: 1) important growth occurs throughout the college career, and 2) growth in different areas often requires different writing instruction.

Such breadth of writing activity is encouraged because WAC conceives of academic writing not only as a broad collection of complex skills beyond what can be mastered in a course or two, but also as distinct *sets* of skills that differ somewhat between disciplines. These unique skills are referred to as "academic literacies"—the plural form denoting that the literacy required to write effectively in Biology may be very different from that of Art History, Business, etc.

With this in mind, it might make sense to explore themes from the scholarship of ELL writing development and to reflect on the support strategies these themes might imply. This is just a limited view of a truly vast topic; the goal is to present some actionable ideas that don't require special linguistic or grammatical knowledge.

As we explore, perhaps a few encouraging messages will emerge: effective support of ELL writers doesn't have to be world-changing or demand a back-to-basics slog, the magic of the writers' natural development over time does a lot of the heavy lifting, and we don't have to ignore other students in order to attend to ELL concerns.

Theme: **Normal development includes a period of early challenges**

ELL writers face special hurdles during a "transitional" period, but they do tend to close the performance gap sometime around junior year (as observed with students in the now-defunct SKELI program for lower-scoring ELL first-years).

The transitional period is usually not linear or orderly (for *all* writers, not just ELL's). We rarely observe smooth, stepwise improvement as new skills are introduced and quickly mastered. It can be a mess, in fact…but with time, students put it all together and sort of "emerge" in leaps and bounds. A chaotic period seems typical or even essential to this shift and is a common feature in student accounts of their own growth.

A few big changes often occur during the transitional period:

1. Students get a sense of what matters most to their performance, so they tend to work more efficiently.

   E.g., students stop reading assigned texts 3-4 times before writing because they know they need to get moving with a few main claims, and they can scan for specific bits or improve these claims as they draft.

2. Students get a sense of the resources available, especially social support resources (i.e., other people or offices), and they use them more effectively (more on this later).

3. Students have taken early chances (or "tested hypotheses" about what's possible or appropriate), and have gathered important feedback they can use. In other words, necessary and normal mistakes bring important lessons. Remember that *new topics and problems require new language resources*, so students <u>must</u> take chances as they develop in the disciplines.

   E.g., early trouble with plagiarism is never ideal, but it's a misstep that often becomes a valuable instructional experience.

Implications:

We can have some faith that errors and missteps are normal, and that our support does have a big impact—*even if we don't see the evidence of that impact immediately*.

Performance is not always equal to learning, and "being on the right track" could be a worthy compromise, especially for students who are unlikely to demonstrate top performance within one semester.

Sharing typical challenges and key resources that served past students seems valuable.

We will explore social support in its own theme, but it helps to maintain a view of what a successful growth trajectory can look like: it usually shouldn't be a "lonely" experience.

Theme: **Task complexity can hinder language performance**

Students will underperform, even at "basic" tasks like elementary grammar, if the task is sufficiently complex. This may be because complex ideas or activities eat up all the writers' attention. So "simple" errors will seem to persist, giving a picture of a student who doesn't know even basic grammar. But the real picture is more complicated! For instance, in studies like those from Dana Ferris, merely noting that errors exist in a sentence or passage can lead to students fixing 50-90% of errors *on their own*.

Implications:

Fluency is not a stand-alone skill; it responds to other factors. These factors drag down grammar performance beneath the students' grammar knowledge. Just signaling the presence of a problem can help, even if we struggle to explain the grammar rule or can't discern the student's intended meaning.

Clearly conceptualizing a writing task seems to support all other writerly skills, from developing ideas to editing for accuracy. Ideally, students can state their task in simple terms, and in just a few sentences. When students know what to do and how to do it, they tend to produce cleaner prose and better organized texts.

Models come to mind as a surprising scaffold for grammar performance, since models tend to simplify or clarify key parts of the writing task. Model texts might offer organizational templates or even sentence-level language that supports appropriate introductions, theses, topic sentences, citations, etc. (E.g., Graff and Birkenstein's *They Say, I Say* handbook is a nice introduction to sentence templates that simplify the writing task without replacing the student's analytical contributions.)

Tasks that rely on less-familiar contexts or sources could invite lower language performance (e.g., Chinese students reading historical primary sources in order to write about the history of a Euro-centric concept).

Exploring editing strategies that break apart creative and analytical tasks should fit well with students' developmental level and reflect writing processes we want them to use.

So, is error-free prose a critical policy we must enforce vigorously, or something we can let simmer while the student develops? Debate rages, but it seems most *practical* to balance realistic near-term expectations and ambitious long-term aspirations. E.g., for the first essay of my first-year writing course, I might enforce my most rigorous standard for just 5-7 important sentences, like the thesis and topic sentences, while I communicate that this standard will get more ambitious over time.

Theme: **The elements of successful writing are discipline-specific**

Writing in the disciplines (WID) employs subject-specific literacies, not just a generic college-level literacy that can be "transferred" across courses. This classic "transfer problem" is compounded by a lack of student recognition of common rhetorical patterns, so they may not immediately see that an FYE summary-response task is similar to annotated bibliography entry in a science class.

The language we use is also situational, and reflects different patterns of articulating, organizing, or defending ideas. Learning a discipline involves learning new language resources that help our work "fit in" and meet audience expectations.

The Genre Approach to writing instruction contends that disciplinary ways of thinking and communicating can be captured by the "moves" writers employ and the language used to carry out those moves. Together, these two resources operationalize the concept of "good" writing and could point to a more objective standard that can be fruitfully taught. Under a genre approach, the task of the teacher is to make these patterns known and offer or observe language that supports key moves.

Implications:

Most striking: we are all language teachers, since students must explore new language to engage with new disciplinary communities and tasks.

Revealing common expectations within a genre may be the biggest service we can offer. Discussions of exemplar texts showing how real writers use language to carry out expected moves appear dense with instructional value.

> This can start as simply as observing successful texts: How is the text organized? Do we see any "special" words/phrases—or special uses of familiar words?

- Do authors "prove" their ideas, or "defend/propose/pursue/contend"?
- How do authors articulate the problem or gap motivating their essay?
- How do they signal/describe disagreement between sources?
- How do they integrate sources smoothly into the discussion?
- What are common steps in an introduction or conclusion? Etc.…

Vocabulary and Phrase Notebooks encourage students to notice useful language, capture it for later, and explore it in a few example sentences. They will see how grammar (accurate use) is often *specific to each word*, a concept called "lexicogrammar" or "word awareness" that explains many high-level ELL errors. For example:

- "Eminent" means important, but *it only describes people*.
- Key terms like "evidence" or "research" are almost never in plural form.
- "Rife" means common, but has a negative connotation and often appears in a unique package: "[noun] is rife with [noun]."
- "Comprise" helps identify parts that make up a whole, and often appears in passive voice: "The [whole] is comprised of [parts]."

Theme: Explicit writing instruction supports development

While we should not expect instant results, we can anticipate good returns from instructional time spent exclusively on writing concerns. "Learning by exposure" does occur, but looks less appealing as a primary strategy; for instance, student accounts of their learning often cite a period of general confusion as students try to determine what is expected of college writing.

Keep in mind that ELL writers don't merely have "gaps" of "missing" knowledge; writing is a multicultural practice with different rules and standards. Students may expertly reproduce practices that are highly valued in a different context, unaware that this deviates from the unique expectations of our setting. A good example of this is the selection of appropriate evidence—e.g., a wise aphorism, deference to authority, or poetic metaphor might be appropriate for some contexts, but dangerously casual for a Skidmore essay. Explicit expectations help highlight these differences.

The "transfer problem" noted previously also motivates us to be extra explicit: students may carry skills close to our targets, but need a reminder or clarification of how those skills translate to the current task. For instance, most students have worked with topic sentences, but defining the specific expectations of topic sentences for a given assignment helps students leverage their existing knowledge more effectively.

Implications:

Routinely setting aside class time for explicit writing instruction can be a worthy investment. You do not need to be an expert in composition studies to do this: looking at exemplars and asking what students "notice" is a fine starting point. You will also notice things students don't, thanks to your expert perspective as an insider—this is uniquely valuable to students on the periphery.

Course readings also might demonstrate useful structures, phrases, organizational schemes, etc. Making time to explore these as artifacts of disciplinary writing helps reinforce and illustrate key writing moves or skills.

Student writing drawn from a recent activity has a special pertinence that will surely motivate the attention of the class. Collecting sentences that show common error types or stylistic concerns ensures a good fit with the developmental level of the class.

Clarifying the observable features of "good" writing also helps ensure we are being fair in our grading, and might even save us some stress in the long term. (I am reminded of a famous study of "quality" in college writing, where the same example essay received a hypothetical "A" and "F" by different college instructors! Eek!)

You can start with any one element, like a citation, thesis, topic sentence, introduction, etc. Is there a typical pattern, or at least a safe model that students can reliably employ?

Theme: **Social Support is common in student accounts of their own success**

Most of the language learning for high-fluency students like ours exists beyond the lessons found in grammar guides and ESL textbooks. In a nutshell, academic literacy is a movement from high-frequency, broadly-relevant language concerns towards the more idiosyncratic customs and procedures of a relatively narrow discourse community.

Students need to learn thousands of words (some estimates of college fluency place it at around 50,000 words), along with how *each* of those words are used. They need to use these words in new genres specific to their professional field. How on earth is this possible, especially in a fast-paced setting, alongside regular college coursework?

Besides the minor miracle of language development itself, it's worth noting what students cite as important factors in their own stories: social supporters, including friends, tutors, roommates, or empathetic instructors.

There are several dimensions to this phenomenon, starting with the importance of *authentic interactions* to language development. Students don't just learn language from studying in a library booth! Instead, they talk about assignments before they write them; they hear their own ideas being summarized back in a new way; they see what language their peers or exemplars employ and pick up the bits that they can use. Language occurs in communities, and we need to participate in a community to really own language.

Implications:

Social resources are a major source of growth, but can be hard to find generous collaborators. Group work in class, peer responses to drafts, or even pod-type seating arrangements can encourage connections inside and outside of class.

We should encourage students to use resources like the Writing Center, SAS, office hours, etc.—and not just as a "quick fix."

We might even be able to incentivize helpful interactions through dedicated class time, extra credit opportunities, or "behavioral rubrics" that ask students to complete certain collaborative tasks before turning in a draft.

A student's first language can be an important resource in a number of ways. Limiting classroom spaces or writing processes to "English only" can diminish this resource and affect student performance. It may be wise to tolerate some degree of first language use, especially as newer students transition into more confident and adept college writers.

There's even a case to be made for club membership and a healthy social life. Blending social and academic pursuits (attending a conference, joining a discipline-specific club, etc.) can be particularly powerful.

Theme: **Internal factors like motivation and self-efficacy are critical to long-term success**

In such a massive, long-term endeavor, students need grit and determination to keep their attention high, to sustain extra effort over months or years, and to respond positively to less-than-encouraging feedback. We ask an awful lot of ELL students! Without motivation and belief that they can succeed, students face a grim outlook.

A good match between the task and student skill level supports higher self-efficacy and avoids "motivation bombs."

Higher self-efficacy, motivation, and a growth mindset are all linked to higher performance and persistence. These factors are amenable to policies and messages that frame mistakes as typical steps along a manageable path.

Teachers often play a special role in breaking down messy tasks into hierarchies of concern or logical next steps. This isn't instruction as much as coaching/organizing—but it makes a big difference in the experiences of students who face early challenges.

Implications:

Think about what we are asking of students, and articulate that clearly: does the task seem surmountable? (E.g., "You need to eliminate grammar errors" is a tough ask…how about "Let's focus on the forms of your verbs, since that was a common problem I found in your sentences.") What is a version of success that you both can live with, at least for now?

Natural growing pains must not be mistaken for indications that the student does not have what it takes to succeed overall. Framing problems as relatively normal or as amenable to a realistic solution can encourage the student effort that is so vital. It is important to signal when improvement is needed, but try your best to break down what improvement means for that assignment or that stage in their writing development. *It will often be stage on a road somewhere, not an end state with the problem(s) "fixed."*

Too many objectives at once can be self-defeating. "One step at a time" is sustainable.

Even simple statements that you believe in the student and you know they will figure it out can be surprisingly impactful (and rare) for ELL students. But we can be confident about this point: with time, they will improve immensely and be legitimate members of a professional community. To get there, they must get through a tough early transition (and possibly another transition into high-level disciplinary work in the major), but these struggles are normal and temporary. If students can just stay engaged, the likelihood of their success is quite high.

Theme: **Many ELL support strategies also support non-ELL writers**

At our high level, the awareness and skills that support ELL writers are similar to those that native-speaking writers need to develop, especially if we see language development as more than just grammar knowledge.

We don't have to draw a firm line between *ELL* writing support and writing support in general. We don't need to exclude ELL concerns from our workshops or send students away to offices to "fix" gaps before they are "ready" to engage in the discipline. Academic literacies are not simply "added" onto general literacy; they are literacies in their own right that students can usually engage with right away.

ELL-specific support may become a bit harder to conceptualize: If language is bound up with community practice, sending a student to a support office outside that community may create a blind spot—e.g., an far-off support office may not know how your discipline approaches problems or communicates findings. (They can still be a big help; my point is that tutoring might not *entirely* replace discipline-specific support.)

Implications:

We can feel confident that our attention to ELL writing concerns also contributes to our ability to support native-speaking writers.

Finally, the strategies suggested in this document could certainly be employed in classes with no ELL writers at all:

- Breaking down tasks into clear and understandable steps
- Exploring what moves or steps are present in exemplar texts
- Examining the language that helps writers enact that move
- Building a "word awareness" that helps us notice useful or special language, especially when we encounter it in "insider" texts

- Taking a long-term view of writing development and communicating that view with students
- Observing that students' language is still developing, and should be a point of focus even for advanced writers
- Balancing high aspirations with realistic expectations that embrace a "+1" or "step-by-step" approach
- Prioritizing student motivation and building up a shared belief that students will succeed

- Thinking about how we can design assignments or courses that respond logically to the capabilities you observe in students
- Integrating *behavioral* expectations that balance with *performance* expectations: e.g., get partner feedback, visit the WC, proofread before submission, etc.