

Responding to ELL Students' Writing

Source: Holt, Sheryl (University of Minnesota), "Working with Non-native Speakers of English." A Presentation at Midwest Writing Centers Association, September 2000

Most ELL-trained teachers say that they take the following approaches with their students:

- Put more direct, instructive comments on papers than you ordinarily might. For example, "You need a thesis statement at the beginning of this paper, within the introduction." The instructor might even find such a statement later in the paper and tell the student where the American audience would expect to find it.
- Try to focus on the content and ignore the grammar at first so you can determine if the content issues are in order: Make sure the paper answers the assignment, is focused, organized, and developed. You will avoid the trap of overcorrecting the grammar and ignoring the content.
- If there are some consistent problems or patterns of error, correct or provide a rule for the pattern and ask the writer to correct THAT mistake throughout the paper.
- If possible, ask the student to hand in another draft for grammar comments after any content issues are addressed. That is not giving unfair advantage to a non-native speaker anymore than giving an oxygen tank to an asthma sufferer is not unfair to people without asthma.
- Decide what is a tolerable WRITING ACCENT—ideas are understandable although the paper still contains minor errors such as article errors or singular/plural agreement problems.
- If you see only one draft, provide comments about both the grammar and the organization, but don't just correct the grammar.
- Try to write more marginal comments instead of just end or front comments. That strategy will help the student see comments at the place of concern. Most non-native speakers have not had years of American-style writing instruction or models and need to have more specific direction.
- Make sure the assignment sheets spell out organizational expectations and guidelines. ELL speakers often depend on printed materials instead of their listening skills.
- In class, write more on the board or on a transparency than you might for an all native-speaker class. It will help non-native speakers understand better and will

reinforce what has been said in class discussions. Summarizing classroom comments from students is also helpful. Often, ELL students have a hard time understanding their peers because of the students' poorly organized statements, fast speech, heavy use of idioms and the ELL students' listening skills.

Sheryl Holt, ELL specialist at the University of Minnesota, writes,

Most instructors encounter non-native speakers of English . . . in their classes at one point or another. Although native speakers of English also have problems with writing, non-native speakers' problems are often quite different, and the approach taken by the instructor needs to be different as well. . . Services such as the student writing center are available on this campus . . . but the majority of the improvement will need to come from comments made by the instructor. Although standards for grading should generally remain the same for [all students in a class], the instructor may need to alter the approach of teaching and commenting slightly for [an ELL writer].

Writing matters Handout, March 2006
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