

## **Bilingual Students in the Composition Classroom: Paving the Way to Biliteracy**

NON-NATIVE SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH, EVEN WHEN THEY GROW UP SPEAKING BOTH THE dominant language and their home language fluently, often flounder in the composition classroom. These bilingual learners may fear writing in English and lack the confidence to succeed in an English composition course. To compound the problem, many also feel inadequate in their native language. Fear and/or resistance interfere with their ability to produce ideas and think critically and deny them equal access to the benefits of this very important course. Well-meaning instructors take these students through the writing process but insist that each component be conducted in English, from freewriting all the way through research, editing, and publication (or evaluation). We would like to suggest, instead, an approach that fosters biliteracy—fluency in reading and writing two languages. We will concentrate on students whose dominant language<sup>1</sup> is not English, but the same methods can help fluent bilingual students who have equal strengths in English and another language. Through the approach we suggest here, students use their dominant language to strengthen their writing in English. In using their dominant language to produce ideas, bilingual learners can practice their literacy skills in their dominant language, improve their literacy in English, and gain confidence as writers.

New approaches are necessary because old ones have not worked. At one Hispanic-serving university on the US-Mexico border, one-year retention rates are 67%, and six-year graduation rates only 27% (UTEP Factbooks). Even some students who graduate often rate their ability to write in English as average or below. In a study conducted at a Hispanic-serving Community College (Baca), bilingual students from six Basic English Composition classes completed a preliminary student survey where they evaluated their English literacy skills.

---

1. We use the terms *first language* and *native language* synonymously to refer to cases where students have learned a language fully before being introduced to English, as in the case of most international students and those who grow up in homes where no English is spoken. *Bilingual* students are those who grow up speaking two languages simultaneously. Many bilingual students have one language they feel most comfortable in; we call this the *dominant language*. Often students will speak one language (or dialect) at home and another in school. We refer to these as *home language* and *school language*. Either of these can be the student's dominant language.

The majority identified their writing, reading, speaking, critical thinking, grammar, and vocabulary skills as average or below average. A minority of these students considered their skills to be satisfactory, and very few rated their skills as above average. These numbers are sadly typical of schools with large populations of students who speak English as a second language. Theorists and practitioners have labeled these students in different ways; they are variously called second language learners, non-native speakers, L2, ESL or ESOL, ELL, and bilinguals. For the purposes of this article, we will refer to these students as bilingual students or minority language learners, depending upon our context. We define bilingualism as the regular use of two languages—whether oral, written, or both.

The plight of these students has not gone unnoticed. In March 1998, the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) published a position statement on national language policy, stating that everyone should be able “to participate in the life of this multicultural nation by ensuring continued respect both for English, our common language, and for the many other languages that contribute to our rich cultural heritage” (CCCC). This means that educators need to resist English-only legislation, efforts that CCCC’s statement calls unnecessary, unrealistic, educationally unsound, and unconstitutional. Rather, educators, and particularly composition instructors, should welcome and take advantage of minority language learners’ linguistic diversity and multiple literacy skills. By doing so, they will provide equal access to the educational process and give bilingual learners the start they need for a successful college career.

## **Theoretical Framework**

A number of theorists have noted the lack of programs and instructor training for teaching composition to students who have learned, or are learning, English as a second language. Paul Kei Matsuda, for example, believes that “the vast majority of U.S. college composition programs remain unprepared for second-language writers who enroll in the mainstream composition courses” (637). He remarks further that, “those who are not native speakers of dominant varieties of English are thus being held accountable for what is not being taught” (640). Scott Wible looks particularly at African American languages and cultures in his 2006 article “Pedagogies of the ‘Students’ Right’ Era” and states that “the most consistently reached conclusion among compositionists is that the students’ right to their own language is a theory that rarely, if ever, has materialized in the writing classroom” (443). This conclusion applies to bilingual learners as well as African American students. Although individual teachers may use effective strategies for minority language learners in their composition classes, no standard pedagogical practices have been developed to address the special needs of this linguistically rich group.

Charles Hirschman criticizes assimilation theory, which “predicts that, over time and across generations, the descendants of immigrants will become more similar to natives—perhaps becoming indistinguishable from the general population” (318) as too general and suggests instead a segmented assimilation hypothesis. This hypothesis “predicts that adaptation is contingent on geographical location, social class of the family of origin, ‘race,’ and place of birth” (319). Hirschman suggests that immigrants should be able to adapt to American culture and education without losing their ethnic identity. If this were the goal of composition instructors, minority language learners might feel less threatened in the writing classroom. Their instructors could help them see second language acquisition as additive rather than subtractive—that is, they can keep what they treasure from their home language and culture while adding the advantages of their adopted language and culture.

“could help them see  
second language  
acquisition as additive  
rather than subtractive”

An important group of theorists have argued for students’ right to their own languages and dialects (Gilyard and Richardson 2001, Delpit 1997, Smitherman 1994, Elbow 2000, Matsuda 2006). Unfortunately, composition instructors tend to get caught up in the drive toward academic discourse and Standard American English. While both of these represent important goals for young writers, their foregrounding does not always serve bilingual students. Rather, they may need to be reserved for the latter stages of document preparation after bilingual students have grappled with the complexities of conveying their critical ideas in early drafts. Guadalupe Valdes discusses “ways in which both subtle and blatant bigotry toward nonnative speakers of English is present in departments of English,” and Michelle Hall Kells warns “that the vestiges of regional racism operate insidiously as language ideologies and prejudice that shape and permeate the college classroom” (29). Writing instructors owe their students the respect that avoids these damaging mindsets in order to provide the best possible educational experiences for bilingual students and, in fact, for all students.

The problem of linguistic prejudice extends beyond the composition classroom, affecting minority language learners at all levels of education and in all subject fields. Patricia Gandara reminds us that “English learners commonly face classrooms that either do not take their language needs into account or are structured to provide an impoverished curriculum that often does not prepare them to succeed academically” (233). If composition instructors do not recognize and address the need to prepare bilingual students for success by helping them become strong writers, this problem is not likely to abate, and bilingual learn-

ers will continue in an “educational pipeline” that is “rife with massive leaks” (Chapa 203). We would like to offer a plan for addressing these problems in the composition classroom.

## **Paving the Way to Biliteracy**

New methodology offers hope for increased retention and graduation of bilingual learners. As Robert Milk et al. suggest, “the challenge for teacher education shifts to how to prepare teachers (both beginning and experienced) to move from wherever they happen to be in their current approach to teaching toward becoming the kind of professionals who can create an optimal learning environment for language minority students” (1). Since nearly every college student must get through the composition requirement, instructors who teach in this area have a particular obligation to address the needs of minority language students and to acknowledge what Keith Gilyard and Elaine Richardson would call the “students’ right to possibility” (37), which is the right to use their home language and have its value acknowledged at the same time they struggle to learn the language of the academy.

Of course, the abilities of bilingual learners vary considerably, and any pedagogy designed to address their needs must be flexible. Patthey-Chavez et al.’s 2005 study indicates that students educated in their native countries and in their native tongues outperform college students who grow up bilingual and receive their education in the United States. We believe this is true because students educated in their native tongue become literate in that language. Students who speak English as a second language but who grow up in the United States often fail to learn to read and write well in either language. This occurs because they concentrate on learning English from the time they begin preschool yet may continue to speak only their native language at home and be read to from books in that language. Thus, English effectively becomes the “school language,” and the native tongue remains the “home language.” This division does not exist for students educated in their native language.

Problems also arise as minority language students begin to write in English but are not taught how to write in their native language. As Daniel Villa explains, “Due to patterns of migration and continued contact with communities of origin, Spanish is being lost between generations, as are other non-English languages in the United States” (90). Most school writing instruction focuses exclusively on English. Thus, these students receive no formal training or guidance in acquiring literacy in their first language. They do not learn to write the language of their parents unless they take special “foreign language” classes, sometimes offered only as electives. Their parents often cannot help them with their English language writing practice unless they happen to be well educated in that language themselves. Even parents who know both languages may ask their children to use the native tongue at home because they want their children to retain fluency. As a result, they may insist their children

NOT write to them in English. In school, students' second languages are not recognized and valued; the emphasis is on acquiring literacy in English alone, leading many educators to undermine or even penalize students using languages other than English.

Most composition teachers know that minority language learners have these problems but are at a loss when trying to decide how to deal with them. They would like to rely on English-as-a-second-language (ESL or ESOL) classes, but these are often available only to international students or those immigrants who did not attend secondary school in the United States. Even if such courses had room for all second language speakers, they could not do the job of the composition class because most of the energy in ESL must be spent first on learning to speak and understand English. Reading and writing have to take a secondary role in the ESL curriculum, at least at the lower levels. Students new to the country must also learn the cultural and rhetorical mores of the society and of academic discourse in the U.S. Thus, the educational context is more complex than one program can teach. The responsibility for educating bilingual students should be shared.

The solution lies in extending the language learning experience of bilingual students so that they take classes in speaking English, classes in reading English, and composition classes designed to help them use their first language as an asset rather than an obstacle to becoming good writers. Daniel Villa offers advice that can help students achieve the biliteracy—fluency in reading and writing two languages—that we feel is vital to their success. In his article “No nos dejaremos: Writing in Spanish as an Act of Resistance,” Villa explains how important it is to recognize students' first languages and see their worth in the classroom. He says, “The voices that express themselves in primary discourse, in either English or Spanish, must be valued. To fail to do so may well alienate the writer, resulting in her disengaging from working toward literacy. Students from Spanish-speaking backgrounds also come from diverse English-speaking backgrounds; accommodating this diversity presents a challenge to all those involved in developing literacy” (89–90). Though Villa is addressing English-Spanish bilingualism, we believe the basic theory can be cautiously extended to other languages. Testing this assumption offers grounds for further research.

## Using a Process Approach to Writing

In spite of some valid complaints from post-process theorists,<sup>2</sup> helping students learn to write through the recursive stages of prewriting, drafting, revising, proofreading, and editing can benefit bilingual learners as they venture into college composition. A. Suresh Canagarajah

---

2. We do not have space in this article to address the particular concerns of post-process theory but refer readers to Thomas Kent's important collection, *Post-process Theory: Beyond the Writing Process Paradigm*.

suggests an additional layer to standard approaches to process (prewriting, drafting, revision, proofreading/editing, and publication) that makes sense when teaching bilingual students. Canagarajah points out that "bilingual competence integrates knowledge of two languages and is thus qualitatively different from monolingual competence" and suggests that we "stop treating any textual difference as an unconscious error" and instead "consider it as a strategic and creative choice by the author to attain his or her rhetorical objectives" (591). We like the flexibility and recursive qualities of the process approach, combined with the attitudinal changes suggested by Canagarajah. In our approach, as with monolingual students, we begin with prewriting, but instead of urging students to "think in English," as we have so often done, we now encourage them to think through the topic in whatever language makes them feel most comfortable. For many students, this will involve code-switching, the process of moving fluidly from one language to another or from one dialect to another, depending on the topic, the audience, and the spatial location of the thinker/writer. Forcing students to engage in prewriting activities in English before they have a clear concept of what they want to say can waste time or, even worse, cause writer's block and/or extreme frustration. Students frustrated at this early stage in the process may well give up on the task and resign themselves to low grades and a poor learning experience. Worse yet, they will give up on writing as a whole and become more fearful or reluctant to communicate in English.

In a 2006 study, Brian J McNely asked bilingual students in a regular college composition class to keep a "recursion log." In this log, the students noted whenever they thought about the paper they were currently working on for the class. One student reported writing all but one of her log entries in English "because the paper was to be written in English." Another student, however, logged 33 entries, of which 17 were written in Spanish and 16 were in English. This student explained that "the language in which she pretexted was contingent on the environment, that when she was with her family, thoughts and concomitant entries took place in Spanish, and that when she was on campus or in class, thoughts were predominately in English" (McNely). This indicates the value of encouraging students to prewrite in either language. If she had been limited to English, the second student mentioned above might only have thought about her essay when she was at school, thereby, eliminating all the prewriting that she did at home in Spanish and also eliminating some of the cultural values that go with the language. Allowing for prewriting in Spanish (or other home language) may encourage multicultural perspectives to flourish more readily. The recursion log approach advocated in McNely's essay also helps bring school into the home in more communicative ways and could be a useful tool to implement in composition classrooms with large bilingual populations.

Peter Elbow encourages writing instructors to let second language students use their

"mother tongues" when writing in English. This, he argues, will help these students express their ideas more effectively. Instructors can concentrate on helping them with Standard Written English later in the writing process. He says, "Full attention to thinking and rhetoric is not possible unless we can make the classroom a place that is safe for all forms of language considered wrong" (329). John Edlund supports this idea in his discussion about teaching minority language learners. Edlund examines Steven Krashen's language acquisition theory and determines that the ideal classroom for minority language students is "a comfortable, non-threatening place with rich opportunities for communicative interaction, lots of comprehensible input, and no grammar drills" (367). When instructors allow critical thinking in any language, they let students know that all parts of their linguistic repertoire add value to their writing expertise.

Critical thinking is key to producing excellent writing, and humans generally think most clearly in their native language or home dialect. As they think, bilingual students can use their most comfortable language to engage one of the common prewriting methods: freewriting, listing, outlining, clustering, mapping, cubing, etc. Obviously, most instructors will not be able to judge the quality of work at this stage because they will not have access to the many different languages their students use, but they can ask students to move gradually from the native language to English. Perhaps a student can freewrite in Taiwanese and then summarize in English. Or she can do a cubing exercise in Spanish and then write an English outline. This practice should result in much more copious pre-writing, better topic selection, and stronger groundwork for essays. By using their first language at this stage of the writing process, students begin with a stronger foundation for their ideas and arguments, giving their compositions more of the substance beginning writers often lack. It should also reduce frustration in the initial stages and encourage self-confidence.

Students themselves see the benefits and merit of being allowed to use their first language in the writing process. Lucia, a minority language learner and a Basic English Composition student at a Hispanic-serving college, wrote at the beginning of the semester in her writing journal:

When I'm writing in English it is very difficult for me because my first language is spanish. I feel like I would be a better writer if the instructor give me a topic in spanish. I think I could write more than 10 paragraphs. I feel that when I'm writing I don't know what I'm doing. I have many ideas in my head, but I don't know how to express myself. I think that these contribute that I don't know how to write in English.

After being advised that she could use Spanish, her first language, at the prewriting stage of the writing process, Lucia's fear of writing and her lack of confidence lessened, if not disappeared. At the end of the semester, she wrote in her journal:

I feel more confident in writing. Freewriting helps us just write without thinking in spelling or punctuation. I believe that freewriting help us to improve and put our ideas in paper. I believe that my favorite part of writing is that right now I can put my ideas correctly in the paper.

Lucia's new confidence in her writing abilities allows her to experiment more with her writing. She still makes errors but is more willing to venture out and explore possibilities in writing, whether in her first or second language. Allowing for second languages to be used in the writing process helps minority language students improve their writing.

Monolingual instructors may feel that immersion is the best practice; allowing students to rely on their first language can seem like coddling or can appear to slow down developing language skills. Instructors often complain about the convoluted syntax and false cognates minority language learners use when they translate from their first language to English. These are valid concerns because, as Constanza Gerding-Salas points out in the online *Translation Journal*, "There are many thorns that can mortify us during the translation process, whatever the nature of the text we face." These thorns include "reading and comprehension ability in the source language . . . linguistic untranslatability, . . . and cultural untranslatability." As they attempt to translate from their native language to English, students may have problems beyond false cognates and syntax differences. They have to wrestle with unfamiliar idioms, neologisms, and even basic differences in grammar and usage like the placement of periods and commas before instead of after quotation marks. However, when, instead of drafting in their native language and translating into English, students prewrite in their native language and move gradually toward composing in English, they are less likely to make the kinds of errors they do when they do direct translation.

Teachers who speak other languages than English can help students who share that language by discussing topics and ideas with them outside of class time in the student's first language. They can also encourage same-language students to work together in out-of-class study groups, possibly sharing texts they have found in their native language and talking about possible approaches to a writing assignment. All of this can be part of the prewriting process that makes bilingual learners more comfortable in the composition environment. Further study may also indicate that these practices can help make the composition environment more comfortable in the students' homes.

## **Drafting**

Drafting, a major component in process writing, presents problems for non-native speakers who tend to worry too much about correctness in the early stages. We urge students to disable grammar and spell checkers when they use word processors and to enable them only

with near final drafts. We also urge instructors to read early drafts for content rather than correctness with the understanding that errors will change as students revise and reorganize their ideas. If a student's writing is incomprehensible, the instructor can get best revision results through individual student-teacher conferences. The student should prepare for the conference by thinking about the subject carefully in the native language, perhaps even jotting down notes and questions in that language. The teacher can then ask the student to try to explain in English what s/he wants to get across, stopping the student at appropriate points to say, "That's good. Write that down," or "I don't understand that. Can you say it in another way?" Non-native speakers of English may want someone to revise for them because they feel insecure. They are even more likely to beg someone else to proofread and edit their work. Since engaging in these practices themselves provides the best opportunities for non-natives to learn to write fluently, the responsibility should be placed squarely on their shoulders. During conferences, teachers should act as coaches, not as editors.

In a 2003 study, Elaine Fredericksen followed the revision process of her student Marisol, a young woman who had received most of her education in Mexico but who had chosen to attend a university in the United States. In an early draft of one paper, Marisol writes about how her dog, Toby, learns:

So, What is then the difference between animal's and human's intelligence? In Toby's case, learning it has been encouraged in part by memories of continuous situations. What I mean by this is that every time Toby did something wrong I have called him with a strong voice and scolded him a little slap. Or when I have played with him, I have used a soft voice and give him a treat. I understand that he has also learned some things by his own like to eat or clean himself, but that can be called and instinct of supervivence—if he does not eat, he dies. (78)

This draft shows that Marisol is working through her ideas about animal intelligence, but her writing exhibits typical problems of minority language students: syntax ("what is then the difference"), use of idioms ("scolded him a little slap"), verb usage ("and give him a treat"), and false cognates ("supervivence," from the Spanish *sobrevivir*—to survive).

Marisol's final draft shows how she has benefited from revision. Much has changed in the essay, of course. What was one paragraph in the early draft became a longer, more detailed analysis. The following paragraph represents a segment of the revision of the previous example:

Toby's lively and bright personality has always been in him; however, he is starting to learn how to control it. Now, the puppy seems to understand when someone corrects him or praises him. When he hears a strong, sharp voice calling him, he hides his tail between his legs and lowers his ears. On the other hand, the puppy's whole body shakes with excitement when I pronounce "Toby" with a soft voice. (85)

Still not quite native, Marisol's prose has reached near-native quality. The final draft was Marisol's sixth attempt, and critics could certainly argue that this does not represent her own ability to write English fluently. However, other evidence suggests that what she learned through drafting carried over into her other classes. For example, she misspelled the word *refrigitator* on the first draft of her essay. The word dropped out totally in her revision of this essay, but she later used forms of it correctly in a memo she wrote for her pre-engineering course:

General Motors has used freon as refrigerant for decades. Without freon GM would have to spend billions of dollars trying to redesign the entire refrigeration systems in home, industrial, and commercial equipment. Replacing just the refrigerated transport of food would cost over 150 billion dollars. (89)

Since this revision example was published in 2003, Marisol has graduated from the university with an engineering degree—some indication that her earlier revision experiences helped her gain the writing skills and confidence necessary to achieve academic success.

Peer reviews, an important tool during the drafting and revision processes, present special difficulties for minority language students because their classmates usually see surface

"feel that they have  
nothing to contribute  
to a peer"

error as an impediment to understanding. The native speakers want to "fix" the errors rather than look at the overall argument and structure of the piece. Instructors can, however, train all students to break content revision and proofreading/editing into separate steps by having two peer

reviews on different days: one for content only and another for surface error. Guided questions given by the instructor or written on a peer review form can help students focus on content alone the first time around. Once assured that they will get help later with correctness, minority language learners often feel free to write more.

Before they approach classmates' papers, students need to practice peer reviewing with anonymous papers. During the full-class practice review, instructors should include essays written by bilingual learners that contain typical syntax and usage errors. Through her own positive attitude, the teacher can model appropriate responses: "Remember we only care about overall content on early drafts. We will get to surface errors later." "Let's overlook the syntax problems and find the good stuff. Did you notice the excellent description in paragraph two?" "What are the best aspects of this paper?" "How well does the essay respond to the prompt? Is it on target?" "If you can't understand a sentence, what is the best way of letting the author know?"

It is essential to train students to approach peer reviews as opportunities to find an audience for their work. Many students, and especially those who are not native English speakers, feel that they have nothing to contribute to a peer. Instructors can explain the value of an authentic reader and train students to respond to the content as an interested fellow human rather than as a critic or judge. Wei Shu argues that "compared to peer response groups composed of native speakers or second language learners exclusively, mixed groups are unique in that group members seem to bring differing levels of linguistic and cultural/pragmatic skills to peer response tasks" (188). This means that mixed peer response groups can provide a more culturally and linguistically diverse sophistication to the peer response process.

Instructors can also tell authors that they may accept or disregard a responder's comments. The purpose of peer review is not to take over the voice of the essay; rather, reviewers give their personal reactions to the piece. This helps bilingual learners gain confidence as readers and critical thinkers. They are able to evaluate the ideas and content of the native English speakers' writing. Not focusing on surface errors the first time around but focusing on the content alone allows bilingual students to feel more confident in giving feedback to their classmates. Because they do not feel knowledgeable or fluent enough in English to critique the "correctness" of the native English compositions, they feel more comfortable examining *what* these speakers have to say rather than *how* they say it.

Some critics feel that mixed-group peer response creates anxiety in bilingual learners, but practice sessions teach students to be productive responders and also help them overcome unrecognized prejudices they may harbor against minority language learners. When instructors emphasize positive readings, asking students to mention first what works well in the paper they are reading and to phrase suggestions for change in a positive way, the experience relieves tension and fosters feelings of community in the classroom. Thus, the peer review process can create more safety for native speakers. This comfort encourages students to write more freely. They come to understand that the response group can serve as a buffer between their first drafts and the fear of being graded. Once their peers have told them what is good about their efforts and have made suggestions to help them improve their writing even more, beginning writers feel more confident about turning in final drafts. These conclusions are drawn from observer experience and also from the comments of students themselves writing about the peer response process. These are some of their unedited comments:

- The thing that helped me overcome these difficulties were the peer group discussions. Reading my classmates papers and having them read mine greatly enlightened me.

- I did not feel pressure while I was writing because I knew I could get opinions from others and then revise.
- Help from my teacher and classmates made revisions much easier because I had been informed by a wide range of people what my paper needed.
- I liked the idea of getting in groups and letting other people read my papers and give me constructive criticism.
- The constant revisions and peer groups are a tremendous source of help.
- I could easily notice my weak points in peer group response and my peers gave me excellent suggestions on how to improve that I had not thought of.

Remarks such as these suggest that peer response does more to relieve writer anxiety than to promote it.

One advantage to peer response is that it encourages multiple revisions, a healthy practice for minority language learners who may require more drafts than native speakers. Instructors who grade second or even third drafts for these students may find the results disappointing, but when minority language learners are allowed to take their drafts to peer groups, tutors, teacher conferences, or in-class proofreading sessions and then revise and edit yet again, they often manage to create successful essays. To some, this might sound like an unfair advantage, but, in fact, the process of repeated revision not only levels the essential unfairness to bilingual learners, but it also helps them learn to write better. Each time they revise, they learn something new. The more they revise, the more English sentence patterns are imbedded in their subconscious, and the more likely they are to remember and use those patterns successfully in the future.

In addition to writing patterns, composition students must learn appropriate methods for research if they are to achieve success in higher education. Research requirements can cause particular problems for bilingual writers, but they can also play an important factor in increasing overall biliteracy. Library and Internet research poses problems even for native speakers. As Phillip Marzluf points out, academic discourse “displaces writers from their language. . . . Academic discourse is distant and detached, a mode of language that reflects back only to abstract concepts” (511). These problems become magnified when students must do this research in a second language. While reading background material in English serves a real purpose for language learners and should certainly be required, students should not be restricted to English-only materials. In fact, having the ability to do research in two languages broadens the research scope. Students may be more enthusiastic about conducting field research, such as interviews, if they can do so in their native language or home dialect. When they find a speaker of their first language to interview and then take the findings and write about them in English, students increase their opportuni-

ties to practice biliteracy. Doing research in two languages also gives students the opportunity for more in-depth understandings; what they read in their native language will usually make more sense to them and give them greater insight into what they read in English. Instructors may not understand titles written in other languages on the Works Cited page, but they can still find the articles to verify that they exist and even do a rudimentary plagiarism check by looking for similarities in the text. Using their first language may even help prevent plagiarism because when bilingual learners use English-only materials they at times just “copy” and place this information in their essays for fear of changing the meaning in these materials. Feeling inadequate in their abilities to paraphrase or restate the secondary authors’ ideas, minority language writers play it safe. They may unintentionally plagiarize rather than risk sacrificing the style and correctness of the secondary sources. But if they are allowed to use sources in their native language, they are more likely to understand the ideas. When they integrate these ideas into their English-language texts, they are forced to paraphrase or restate.

Translation is a specialized skill, and direct word-for-word translations will produce an awkward text. Teachers can respond to this awkwardness by explaining that the best kind of translation is a paraphrase—that is, communication of the author’s general ideas rather than a word-by-word approach. These kinds of explanations can reach even the native speakers and help teach the difference between paraphrasing, para-plagiarizing (changing only a few of the author’s words), and outright plagiarism. Of course, teachers will explain the need to cite sources even when the text is paraphrased.

A possible way to convey these ideas to an entire class is through the example of idioms. The instructor might ask students how they would explain the idiom “Something is fishy here” to a non-native English speaker. The word *fish* would not appear in the explanation at all. Rather, a paraphrase might be “Something doesn’t seem right about this situation.” Thus the “translator” of the idiom ends up with what constitutes a good paraphrase.

## **Proofreading/Editing**

Instructors do well to separate the process of proofreading and then editing out errors from content revision. Proofreading does the most good on near-final drafts when students have said what they want to say and revised the content to their satisfaction (and the satisfaction of their reviewers). At this point, a proofreading circle helps both native and non-native English speakers. In a full-class circle, students pass their drafts clockwise to the person sitting next to them. The proofreaders do not cross out or change anything the author has written; rather, they underline anything they have questions about and write, preferably in pencil and only in the margins, the concern they have about that part of the text. They might underline

the verb *use*, for instance, and write in the margin “should be *used*.” Other comments might be “Add a comma,” “Check spelling,” or even something like, “This doesn’t sound right to me. Can you reword the sentence?” Such non-judgmental suggestions encourage authors to recheck and edit their writing.

When the first reader has proofread the entire essay, s/he looks around the circle to see who has also finished and trades papers with the other person. If no one has finished, the

“not an obstacle they  
must overcome to  
avoid censure”

proofreader passes the paper on clockwise to the next person and waits for someone else to finish and give her/him an essay for a second proofreading. All papers should go through three or four readers. The papers then go back to the author who looks at the suggestions in the margins and asks the

proofreader or the instructor for advice if necessary. Minority language writers can use this as an opportunity to get clarification, learn a rule, or discuss idiomatic constructions with other students or the instructor. When they correct their own writing at the point of need, students see how grammar is tied to meaning. As David Blakesley explains, “grammar has a fundamental role in making meaning” (196); it is a rhetorical tool that can help writers express themselves more clearly, not an obstacle they must overcome to avoid censure. After each proofreading session, non-natives may request another student-teacher conference in order to receive explanations of any items that remain unclear.

Initially some native English-speaking students may be skeptical about the value of having minority language classmates proofread their writing, but punctuation or grammar may be a strength of any student. In fact, classes that teach English as a second language often focus on grammar rules, so bilingual learners may be well versed in the rules but not always able to apply them to their own writing. Once bilingual students have mastered the differences in English usage from their first language, they can impress their peers with their proofreading skills. They also can profit from reading other students’ essays, increasing their literacy in terms of reading, and from discussions about punctuation, grammar, and linguistic choices.

After adequate practice in a positive environment, students tend to enjoy proofreading circles for several reasons: they get plentiful help with proofreading; they have a chance to show off their expertise with punctuation, grammar, and usage; and they have the opportunity to read other students’ essays. Relegating surface error to this kind of session relieves students of anxiety as they work on early drafts and also helps them turn out error-free final drafts. This boosts their confidence and makes grading easier for the instructor.

Compartmentalizing tasks is particularly valuable for students struggling to write in a second language.

After distributing questionnaires to several classes at the end of the semester, Fredericksen noted that many students marked Proofreading Circles as one of their favorite classroom activities. Many students (and their evaluators) buy into the commonplace that good grammar makes good writers, and they feel that proofreading circles and workshops improve their final products. They offer evidence for this in their comments on end-of-semester reflections:

- My grammatical errors dramatically decreased in number, and [editing] enabled me to catch simple mistakes such as misspelled words, misplaced commas, and improper use of words.
- The spelling and grammatical errors that were pointed out were greatly appreciated. . . . I would not have noticed them.
- It is very important that very many different people have a look at your paper because one person in your revision group might be very good in grammar and another person might be very good in usage of vocabulary and syntax.
- The proofreading process is a necessary tool for all writers.

While we have no evidence to suggest that group proofreading sessions teach students to write more correctly on subsequent drafts, our students' responses let us know that these sessions make them feel more confident about their final drafts. Through the process, students also learn the value of having someone else check over their drafts and the merits of careful editing. These are tools that they can use to their advantage as they undertake future writing tasks.

## **Evaluating/Publishing**

Most instructors find evaluating student papers the most difficult part of their job. When dealing with bilingual writers, the problem becomes more complex. Do they follow the same standards for these writers as for native English speakers? Do they make allowances? While all students should be exposed to certain kinds of rhetorical devices and situations, grading standards must be appropriate for the particular educational setting, including the makeup of the student population and students' prior experience in reading and writing English.

Beverly J. Moss worries that in most classrooms "We're either focusing too much on how we're all the same—which usually translates into all of us being held up to one single standard held by a group in a power position—or we focus on how we're different. There never seems to be a sense that we need to do both." She says, "I want my differences to be recognized and celebrated, and I want my similarities to be recognized and celebrated" (85). As

composition teachers of bilingual learners, we need to acknowledge different levels of ability and make allowances for those differences as we evaluate their work. This does not mean that we pass essays that are poorly researched and poorly written. Rather, we must separate content from correctness and give praise for strong content while allowing certain latitude for minority language writers. This latitude may include an extra conference and more revision time for bilingual students. It may also include putting less weight on correctness in grading. This is good pedagogy when dealing with all students because students who worry about writing correctly write less. Even ancient rhetoricians recognized the value of copiousness in increasing fluency. Cicero recommends in *De Oratore* that aspiring rhetors “write as much as possible. The pen is the best and most eminent author and teacher of eloquence” (Qtd in Crowley and Hawhee 355). Our job is to encourage students to write more, not discourage them by marking every error and overlooking good ideas. As Constance Weaver notes in *Teaching Grammar in Context*, error is “a necessary concomitant of growth” (59). Students do not learn everything at once; they need to absorb knowledge little by little. We can insist that students rewrite until their papers are totally correct, but we should not punish bilingual writers with low grades before giving them the opportunity to edit and, in the process, to learn the rules of Standard English grammar and usage.

Teacher attitudes matter very much in the education of bilingual students. If we look at these students as inferior thinkers because we do not understand them, we do them great harm. It is crucial for writing instructors to listen to and acknowledge their students' ideas, no matter in what voice they are first conveyed—even if that voice mixes English with another language. One bilingual learner recalls her early days in school: “I remember being slapped on the hand in school if I was caught speaking in Spanish, and I was reprimanded at home for speaking English.” Thus, for this learner, the bilingual experience was doubly negative. Teachers of bilingual writers should consider Julie Hagemann's argument that “good” or “right” English depends on the writer's audience and context. Standard Written English is not necessarily “good” English. It all depends on what the context is, what the purpose the writer has for writing, and who the writer's intended reader is. “Good” English should not mean giving up one's self-identity (142). Sensitive teachers can instruct their students about possible variations as they present the concept of diverse audiences and multiple purposes. In this way, students come to understand that many kinds of writing have value.

Educators can help bilingual students by recognizing their differences and honoring their ability to speak two languages. Teachers can also learn from these students. Susan Jarrott says, “Language difference holds out so much more promise as an area of humanistic study than is encompassed by the error-correction paradigm. A growing body of research in fields called ‘bilingual writing’ and ‘contrastive rhetorics’ views language difference as a

resource, a feature of students' thinking and writing in English that warrants study" (1). By changing our methods only slightly to make them more inclusive, we can teach bilingual students the writing process and encourage their efforts toward success. As we grant open access to these students and train them to be biliterate contributors to our society, we learn more about how writing is learned and how better to teach it. We also create a society that is open to all its citizens and the many voices they represent.

## Works Cited

- Baca, Isabel. "English 0310 Basic English Composition: A Study." Unpublished report, 2003. El Paso Community College, Valle Verde Campus, El Paso, Texas.
- Blakesley, David. "Reconceptualizing Grammar as an Aspect of Rhetorical Invention." *The Place of Grammar in Writing Instruction*. Eds. Susan Hunter and Ray Wallace. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 1995. 191-203.
- Canagarajah, A. Suresh. "Toward a Writing Pedagogy of Shuttling between Languages: Learning from Multilingual Writers." *College English* 68.6 (2006):589-604.
- CCCC. "Policy Statement: The National Language Policy." Conference on College Composition and Communication (March 1998). [www.ncte.org](http://www.ncte.org)
- Chapa, Jorge. "The Problematic Pipeline: Demographic Trends and Latino Participation in Graduate Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Programs." *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 5.3 (2006): 203-37.
- Crowley, Sharon and Debra Hawhee. *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*. 3rd ed. New York: Pearson, 2004.
- Delpit, Lisa. "Ebonics and Culturally Responsive Instruction." *Rethinking Schools* 12.1 (1997): 6-7.
- Edlund, John R. "Non-Native Speakers of English." *Concepts in Composition*. Ed. Irene L. Clark. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2003. 363-87.
- Elbow, Peter. "Inviting the Mother Tongue: Beyond 'Mistakes,' 'Bad English,' and 'Wrong Language.'" *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. 323-50.
- Fredericksen, Elaine. "A New World of Writers: Teaching Writing in a Diverse Society." New York: Peter Lang, 2003.
- Gandara, Patricia. "Strengthening the Academic Pipeline Leading to Careers in Math, Science, and Technology for Latino Students." *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education* 5.3 (2006): 222-37.
- Gerding-Salas, Constanza. "Teaching Translation: Problems and Solutions." *Translation Journal* 4.3 (2000): <http://www accurapid.com/journal/13educ.htm>. December 2006.

- Gilyard, Keith and Elaine Richardson. "Students' Right to Possibility: Basic Writing and African American Rhetoric." *Insurrections: Approaches to Resistance in Composition Studies*. Ed. Andrea Greenbaum. Albany: SUNY, 2001. 37-51.
- Hagemann, Julie. "A Metalinguistic Approach: Helping Students Acquire the Language of the Academy." *Academic Literacy in the English Classroom: Helping Underprepared and Working Class Students Succeed in College*. Ed. Carolyn R. Boiarsky. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2003. 131-44.
- Harris, Muriel. *Teaching One-to-One: The Writing Conference*. Urbana: NCTE, 1986.
- Hirschman, Charles. "The Educational Enrollment of Immigrant Youth: A Test of the Segmented-Assimilation Hypothesis." *Demography* 38.3 (2001): 317-36.
- Jarratt, Susan. "Bilingual and Biliterate: How Students Use Multiple Language Competencies New Research in Student Writing." *Between the Lines: Newsletter of the School of Humanities*. June 2002.
- Kells, Michelle Hall. "Understanding the Rhetorical Value of Tejano Code Switching." In Kells, et al. 24-39.
- Kells, Michelle Hall, Valerie Balester, and Victor Villanueva, eds. *Latino/a Discourses: On Language, Identity & Literacy Education*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, 2004.
- Kent, Thomas, ed. *Post-process Theory: Beyond the Writing Process Paradigm*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University, 1999.
- Marzluf, Phillip P. "Diversity Writing: Natural Languages, Authentic Voices." *College Composition and Communication* 57.3 (2006): 503-22.
- Matsuda, Paul Kei, et al. eds. *Second-Language Writing in the Composition Classroom: A Critical Sourcebook*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2006.
- Matsuda, Paul Kei. "The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in U.S. College Composition." *College English* 68.6 (2006): 637-51.
- McNely, Brian J. "Re-Visioning Revision: Recursion Theory and the Research Writing Class." Unpublished essay, 2006.
- Milk, Robert, Mercado, Carmen, and Alexandria Sapiens. "Re-Thinking the Education of Teachers of Language Minority Children: Developing Reflective Teachers for Changing Schools." *NCBE Focus: Occasional Papers in Bilingual Education* 6 (Summer 1992). [www.NCELA.gwu.edu](http://www.NCELA.gwu.edu) January 2006.
- Moss, Beverly J. "Cultural Differences as Resources." In *Teachers Thinking, Teachers Knowing*. Ed. Timothy Shanahan. Urbana: NCTE, 1994. 76-87.
- Patthey-Chavez, G. Genevieve, Paul H. Dillon, and Joan Thomas-Speigel. "How Far Do They Get? Tracking Students with Different Academic Literacies Through Community College Remediation." *Teaching English in the Two-year College* 32.3 (2005): 261-77.

- Shu, Wei. "Interaction and Feedback in Mixed Peer Response Groups." In Matsuda, et al. 186-209.
- Smitherman, Geneva. " 'The Blacker the Berry, the Sweeter the Juice': African American Student Writers." *The Need for Story: Cultural Diversity in the Classroom and Community*. Urbana: NCTE, 1994. 80-101.
- "Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers." Conference on College Composition and Communication. January 2001. [cccstatement.html](http://cccstatement.html).
- UTEP Factbooks. <http://www.cierp.utp.edu/Factbooks>. 2004-2005.
- Valdes, Guadalupe. "Nonnative English Speakers: Language Bigotry in English Mainstream Classrooms." *ADFL Bulletin* 31.1 (1999): 43-8. <http://www.adfl.org/adfl/bulletin/V31N1/311043.htm>
- Villa, Daniel. "No nos dejaremos: Writing in Spanish as an Act of Resistance." In Kells, et al. 85-95.
- Weaver, Constance. *Teaching Grammar in Context*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook, 1996.
- Wible, Scott. "Pedagogies of the 'Students' Right' Era: the Language Curriculum Research Group's Project for Linguistic Diversity." *College Composition and Communication* 57.3 (2006): 442-78.



**Elaine Fredericksen** has forty years of teaching experience at all levels. She earned a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition from the University of Alabama in 1996 and works as an Associate Professor of English. She directs a First-year Composition program at a mid-sized, Hispanic serving university. Her book *A New World of Writers: Teaching Writing in a Diverse Society* was published in January 2003 by Peter Lang, and she serves on the editorial board for the *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*.



Ismael Studio, El Paso, TX

**Isabel Baca** has taught composition, technical writing, and business communications courses at levels ranging from the eighth grade to college, and she works as a university Assistant Professor of English. She has served as a workplace writing and communication consultant for numerous industries and institutions. Her research and publications focus on teaching writing at Hispanic-serving institutions, intercultural communication, community writing partnerships and service learning, workplace writing, and basic writing. She received her Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Professional Communication and has served as English Discipline Coordinator and Service Learning Program Coordinator at a higher-education institution. She lives and teaches on the U.S./Mexico border where she was born and raised as a bicultural and bilingual individual.