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Providing Feedback and Grades to Second Language Students

Overview

Students for whom English is not their first language (referred to as L2 students in this handout) have been a steady presence in US higher education recently. You may receive papers in which interesting ideas are deeply buried in numerous language-use errors, and you may ask yourself: How can I grade this paper? How can I best help this student with my feedback? This resource offers answers to questions like these and shares with you some effective practices for responding and grading L2 papers.

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General Considerations

Before we offer any tips on working with L2 students, we would like to acknowledge the similarities between L1 and L2 students in the broad sense. For example, both groups employ a recursive process involving planning, drafting, writing, and revising when composing a paper. Both groups benefit from personalized instruction that builds on their existing literacy, cultural, and intellectual backgrounds. Neither group is likely to benefit from frontloading grammar instruction. That being said, there are a number of unique characteristics of L2 students that instructors need to be aware of in order to make their teaching equally effective for their L2 students.

The Complexity of the L2 Student Population
Various names have been used to describe this population: “Second language (L2) learners,” “foreign language (FL) learners,” “English language learners (ELL),” “English as a second language learners (ESL),” “bilingual students,” “international students,” “multilingual students,” “resident ESL students,” “generation 1.5 students,” etc. While the selection of these terms

suggests the speaker's scholarly stance or scholarly interests, the discrepancy of these terms suggest how complex and multifaceted this population can be. For example, you may think where the student learned the language is most important, and thus call someone who learned English in the US a second language learner, whereas you may call another person who learned English in their home country a foreign language learner. Or, in the US context, you may think the origin of the student is most suggestive of this population, and you will call them international students. Or, if you talk with K-12 teachers very often, you might think of these students as resident English language learners. All in all, there is not one single term that can characterize this population adequately and inclusively. The current practice is to use multiple terms concurrently. Researchers from different fields have their preferred terms, but when it comes to interdisciplinary communication, a detailed description of the target learner group will be most helpful. As this handout is primarily targeted at higher education practitioners, we only introduce these names so that our readers will know that when different names are used, they may or may not refer to the same group of students. Our focus is on the characteristics of this group. We need to know our students well; then we can provide and adjust our practices to best support them.

The Continuum Between International Students and Resident English Learners

Resident English learners is term most frequently used in the US context. They refer to students who came to the US at a young age and naturally *acquired* the English language. International students, on the other hand, is a term usually used to talk about students who came to the US for higher education. These students are thought to have *learned* the English language at school in a foreign country.

Traditionally, we have adopted a more extreme view to consider these two groups. We tend to think the first group is similar or identical to a native speaking student as they often have no accent and are quite familiar with the US culture. While for the second group, we are likely to think they speak English with a foreign accent and are not too familiar with US culture. However, the internet and global migration of people have made the distinction between these two groups less clear. There are many international schools all over the globe. Some students may have attended these schools since kindergarten. There are also a large number of native English speakers living in foreign countries and nonnative speakers frequently visiting or summer camping in English speaking countries. These, among other influences from the internet and the media, have made simulating an English speaking environment easy for many students who want to learn English in a foreign place.

One reason that students were initially distinguished as belonging to one group or the other was to determine the support necessary for their learning. For resident ESL students in the higher education context, additional support is often automatically justified as unnecessary; for international students, ESL courses are often automatically compulsory. But this way of accommodating these two groups cannot stand any more due to the decreased gap between these the groups. We thus recommend instructors not decide a student's English academic literacy based on his/her passport . Rather, we recommend that instructors examine students' proficiency on a spectrum of the following categories:

Eye learner ←→ Ear Learner
Language can be learned at school or through interaction with native speakers., If international students attend a traditional local school and have few interactions with native speakers, they will likely learn English through studying English textbooks. They are thus nicknamed “eye learners.” On the other hand, if a child immigrated to an English speaking country at a young age, s/he likely learned the language first through playing with his/her native speaker peers. In this case, they are considered to have learned the language through ears, or “ear learners.”

“Eye learners” are likely to read and understand texts easily, but they may not be able to comprehend ongoing conversation as easily as “ear learners.” They may also be more reluctant to talk in class. Several reasons can explain this: the most direct one is the lack of practice. If a student learned the language through texts, s/he may not have enough exposure to the syllables. S/he needs to listen more and talk more. The second reason is cultural. In most Asian cultures, students are not trained to talk in class. It is not because English is a foreign language; they simply haven’t spoken much in previous classes. This, again, requires practice. It may take the student some time to adjust to the more “talkative” US classrooms. Thirdly, it may be because of the student’s worry to make speech errors in public. The L2 student may have been taught and reminded countless times by his/her previous English teachers that he/she has grammar or pronunciation issues. When in the US context, this self-awareness get intensified because the student thinks he/she is the only one who will make language errors. He/She is worried if his/her instructors and peers would think him/her less. It takes time for the student to walk away this feeling, and a supportive and relaxing classroom environment will accelerate this process.

If “ear learners” later had good schooling in the immigrated country, they may be quite similar to native speaking students. But if the student comes from a socioeconomically disadvantaged immigrant family, s/he may have experienced some setback or discontinuity in his/her literacy development. This is when additional support is needed. Although the student may sound and appear like a native speaking student, s/he needs extra support to meet college-level English expectations, especially in academic writing.

When we use “ear learner” or “eye learner” to think of our students, we should not take an absolute stance as to assume international students are automatically “eye learners” and resident English language learners are automatically “ear learners.” Yet, we can use this spectrum to gauge where our students may fall and offer appropriate strategies accordingly.

Content Knowledge in L1 ←→ Content Knowledge in L2
One important aspect that less experienced instructors tend to forget is students’ prior knowledge. Here “knowledge” is used in a very loose sense. It includes students’ prior intellectual levels, literacy levels, cultural knowledge, etc. If we evaluate students on these scales, resident ESL students are more likely to have higher levels of mastery of the content knowledge in English, whereas international students are more likely to have higher levels of mastery of the content knowledge in their first language. In other words, students come to our

classes readily equipped with some useful knowledge. Whatever that knowledge is, their instructors are very likely to be better off if they can rightly activate and build on their students' prior knowledge.

Cummins, a bilingual researcher who created the Common Underlying Proficiency theory tells us that for those who have developed grade-level cognitive proficiency, it may take L2 students a longer time to demonstrate that proficiency in a way meaningful to their content course instructors. Their language skills, together with their knowledge of the target classroom culture need to catch up. This also explains why so many students like to write about topics related to their home country in first-year English composition classrooms---that's where these students' expertise lies at this early stage. Acknowledging and integrating students' home culture is likely to be a good practice to build on students' prior knowledge. Another aspect worthy of mentioning is the instructors' attitudes towards students' use of their mother tongue. Due to the influence of the initial research on L1 interference, some instructors tend to think students should be required to think and speak in the target language (e.g., English) only, since they came to the target culture to learn the language. However, this requirement is hard to implement and may not prove really useful either. Not all students can control what language comes to mind when they are thinking. While the more proficient students may have difficulty meeting this expectation, the less proficient students may be left feeling discouraged. Take the writing process for instance. Abundant evidence has shown that using their first language helps students generate more ideas. While we want to request students use more target language and know more of the target culture, leaving some space to students' L1 use is also conducive to their L2 development.

Conclusion

There are many other characteristics (e.g., literacy levels, oral communication skills, attitudes towards the target language and culture) that L2 students have. For more in-depth discussion of the second language acquisition process, please refer to **Supplement 1: Theories on Second Language Acquisition.**

Generally, we would advise instructors to adopt a continuum perspective to think of our students. We would caution against simply assigning an L2 student to the "resident" or "international" L2 category. Rather, we advise instructors to think of the student as combinations of different characteristics and to be open to the possibility that a given L2 student may resemble typical international students in some categories but appear identical to typical resident L2 students in others.

Strategies for Providing Feedback

When you provide feedback to students' written work, we would recommend you consider the following:

1. **Higher Order Concerns vs. Lower Order Concerns**
   Focus the majority of your feedback on higher order concerns, such as organization, analysis, etc. It may occasionally be necessary to model more elegant or accurate use of

language when you provide feedback on higher order concerns, but make sure that your feedback doesn't focus solely on language-use issues.

2. **Use Error Code to Provide Language Error Feedback**
   When you do provide feedback on language-use issues, try to do so in a way that will complement the workings of the language acquisition process. Here are some steps:
   - Step 1: Spend ten to twenty minutes in class talking with students about what the codes mean and give them some examples of how you will use the codes. You can also solicit their feedback on the table and make revision accordingly.
   - Step 2: Identify some syntactic or semantic errors that your students make. You can also use the categories in **Supplement 2: The Error Type Table** for a detailed explanation of the types of errors students make and whether correcting them would yield the expected pedagogical result.
   - Step 3: Read through the student paper to determine which errors are persistent error types and address them accordingly. **Supplement 3: The Error Code List** provides a coding scheme to mark the errors and **Supplement 4: Using Error Codes to Respond to an L2 Paper** provides an example of using the error code list to mark a student paper.
   - Step 4: Use the code consistently throughout the semester. As language learning takes time, it will be more helpful to if you can offer consistent feedback. If you decide to use the error code approach to respond to L2 language errors, it will be more beneficial to them more if you can stick to one coding scheme throughout the semester.

3. **Be Selective in Providing Language Use Feedback**
   In general, feedback on language-use errors will complement the workings of the language acquisition process if it adheres to the following suggestions:

   - **Don't mark every single error.** Focus only on those errors that either interfere substantially with meaning and/or that the student is likely to be able to correct without your assistance. **Supplement 2: The Error Type Table** offers advice on determining which errors a student is likely to be able to correct without your assistance.
   - **Allow students a chance to correct them**. We recommend you mark errors in a way that not only indicates what type of error the writer committed but also allows the writer an opportunity to correct the error. L2 students don't come to the classroom with the same degree of preparation in their language as L1 students. Allowing them a chance to correct their errors can provide valuable space for real learning to happen.
   - **Create semantic or syntactic models**. When you notice students consistently using a word or sentence structure incorrectly, rather than offering a simple comment like

"word use errors" or "this sentence structure is problematic," it will be more beneficial to their learning if you can offer a correct use of the word or sentence structure in a similar context.

- **Focus on use rather than fixed rules.** There are ambiguities and inconsistencies even in native speakers' language. Rather than stipulating a rule, it may be more useful to explain why one use is more preferred in a certain context. For example, the selection of a particular tense can be quite tricky. It's hard to explain why the experienced writer's mixed use of tense makes sense yet L2 students' mixed use is confusing. In this case, simply asking students to use a recommended tense may be less effective than a more contextualized explanation of why a particular tense is preferred in the context.
- **Be more lenient on determiners.** Errors involving the use of determiners (words such as "the," "a/an," "all," "some," "none," "my," "your," and "many") generally don't affect the writer's meaning in substantial ways. Therefore, it's not an effective use of your time to focus on these errors. If determiner errors are the only kind of error made consistently by an L2 writer, then it may, indeed, be worth the time and effort of correcting or calling attention to each error. However, it's best to focus your time and attention on other types of errors first. Once these other errors have been addressed, you can address errors in the use of determiners that affect the writer's meaning. Finally, if time permits, you can address determiner-use errors that do not substantially affect the writer's meaning.

4. Oral Feedback can be more Efficient

When you encounter a really incomprehensible paper, instead of spending hours deciphering the text and crafting feedback, it will be much more efficient to simply send the student an email, inviting him or her to discuss this paper with you in your office. Students may be surprised or uncomfortable at first, but that feeling will soon go away once they realize this is simply a more effective way for them to receive clear feedback from you. In our practice, face-to-face communication is most efficient in responding to these papers.

Strategies for Grading L2 Papers

When grading the written work of L2 students, it can be difficult to "read beyond" substantial language-use errors to focus on the quality of higher order elements, such as organization, analysis of evidence, and appropriateness of the rhetorical devices used. Moreover, language-use errors may, in some cases, affect the higher order elements of a paper in ways that are both unintended and unrecognized by the author. The following strategies may help you assign a grade that evaluates the quality of higher order elements, rather than the correctness of students' language use.

1. **Explain your evaluation criteria in class.** This could benefit both L1 and L2 students, but L2 students in particular need explicit discussion of the instructor's expectations.

Remember, they come from a different cultural background and may have some obstacles understanding some standardized rubric language. It will be helpful if you can spend five minutes in class going over your evaluation criteria for each assignment.

2. **Conduct a peer review session** before assigning the final grade. Pair up all of your students or put them in small groups provide class time for the partners to talk about their ideas and to draft language that accurately expresses what they want to say. The partners can serve as a "check" for each other: if partner A's use of language interferes with Partner B's comprehension, both partners can work together to find a new way of expressing partner A's ideas. Instruct students to pay particular attention to the language used to perform the following rhetorical functions: express the thesis, transition between sections of the paper, and introduce and analyze quotations. To help with this process, you might consider strategies offered in the Sweetland Teaching resource **Using Peer Review to Improve Student Writing**.

3. **Hold conferences** with students who struggle to express themselves. Talk through the ideas contained in each student's paper and help him or her devise ways of expressing those ideas more precisely.

4. **Request an outline**. If a student consistently struggles to express him- or herself accurately in English, require that he or she submit an outline with each major written assignment. The outline can help you see which ideas he or she wanted to express, how those ideas relate to one another, and what the overarching point of the paper is. Alternatively, you may create a form or worksheet that students must complete and submit with each major written assignment.

5. **Ask for an alternative assignment**. If a student consistently encounters substantial difficulties expressing him- or herself accurately in English, consider allowing him or her to submit alternate assignments that demonstrate understanding of content without relying quite so heavily on traditional written academic English forms. Such alternate assignments might include an oral presentation, graphs, tables, or drawings. You can assess such assignments both for content and for the qualities of good writing, such as clarity of argument, depth of thought, organization of ideas, meaningful use of transitions, etc.

6. **Use an analytical rubric.** An analytical rubric may look more complex than a holistic one, but it can offer a more straightforward view of your expectations. The advantage of an analytical rubric is it sends a relatively clear message to the students about how points will be docked. For example, you may use a grading rubric for each major written assignment with categories and "weights" like this: Focus; Structure; Analysis of Evidence (**See "Analytic Rubric" in Giving Feedback on Student Writing**). You can also add a language category if needed. The analytical rubric can give L2 students a clear sense how much you value their use of correct English versus how much you value their clear articulation of ideas, and how inadequate language use may affect the reader's comprehension and evaluation of the paper.

7. **Allow students some time to correct their language use errors**. If you must assign a grade for language-use (commonly referred to as "grammar"), or if you feel that it is a

good idea to assign a “grammar” grade, consider assigning this portion of the student’s grade after the final draft of the paper has been submitted and students have had a chance to correct language-use errors identified in earlier drafts. For example, in point 2, we discussed how peers can offer feedback to a student’s writing. You can also ask students to grade each other’s paper on “language effectiveness” or “proofreading” in the peer review session. That poor grade will remind a sloppy writer or an L2 student to spend more time on language use. But it won’t hurt their final grade once they make the revision accordingly. You can update the student’s language score in the final draft. **Supplement 5: Sample Draft before and after Language Use Feedback** shows a student paper before and after peer feedback on language use.

Further Reading

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