

Suggestions for Teaching Writing to English Language Learners

“Good writing has very long sentences, is difficult for readers to understand, uses lots of “big words” to impress the reader and what the author wants to say is at the end.”
--a Japanese student

Differences in cultural assumptions about good writing:

- **Thesis Placement.** Many cultures put the main argument at the end of the essay and use intervening paragraphs to mount evidence to reach that conclusion. We place our claim at the start as well as creating a map of where we are headed and what evidence will support it. For many English language learners, this “loaded” first paragraph feels like you give away the point too early. For many, reworking their mode of writing, ingrained since their earliest essays, where the thesis is the reader reward, requires a major restructuring of the way they think.
- **Culture of Originality vs. Culture of Authority.** We value the individual voice, we want the student to present his/her view, feel entitled to speak freely, and comment on the views of experts. Often, elsewhere, the views of experts take precedence over one’s own. Asian students in particular are taught to value the teacher, the scholar, and the text above their own views. We also teach what might be confusing to all new students—be original, but borrow heavily from others.
- **Ownership of Ideas.** We emphasize the ownership of ideas and value intellectual property. Many cultures make different distinctions and freely adapt the work of others. Concepts of plagiarism, therefore, are tricky to grasp. EFL students often use outside sources without attribution without grasping its seriousness. In some cultures, teachers urge students to share answers and homework, making no individual distinction regarding authorship. Alternatively, they may not be specific enough regarding parameters for group-generated work. Getting it “right” – and for a high grade – often pre-empts doing it yourself. Academic integrity, as we understand it, has little meaning in this context, unless fully clarified.
- **Sense of Self.** Discourse practices construct and reflect our cultural and social identities. To change a discourse practice is to reinvent the self in a new, often uncomfortable, way. One Chinese writer, a grad student who became an English Ph.D., speaks of how he became an “I” in Western discourse, having always conceived of himself as a “we.”
- **Diplomatic vs. bold speech.** Some cultures teach writers to avoid taking a stand which could offend others, to hide one’s own opinion; it is not just polite, it is respectful. We tend to value the clear position, well-defended. (Deborah Tannen has discussed the argument culture which defines a large percentage of written and spoken communication in the US.) Many cultures value informative essays where both sides are presented without the writer taking a position on them. Success is measured by how accurately a student can pull together the important sources, not what he or she says about them.
- **Imitating the experts.** English language learners often think that mimicking the experts and employing the jargon of the writers they read is good practice. They often overuse thesauruses or dictionaries in an effort to sound learned. The discerning use of discipline-specific terms is important, but jargon, run-on sentences, and dense paragraphs, despite what the experts do, does not a paper make clear. Teach the difference: clarity and simplicity is what makes good writing.

What you can do:

- **Set limited goals.** Ask what the student wants to work on. A common error is to “correct” too much on one essay – circling all of the grammar errors and tackling the big issues of thesis and evidence. Research into how students learn indicates that less is more; only so much new material can be absorbed at a time. Choose a focus—structure or grammar—but don’t try to fix the whole thing. A good rule of thumb is to fortify strengths through praise, highlight the learning tasks key to success in your class, connect the student with resources.
- **Be accessible.** In other cultures, teachers are often unapproachable. Invite them to ask you questions, meet you after class, come to an appointment during office hours. Explain what office hours are, and that students are supposed to take advantage of this as part of the class. Then explain that you are there to offer support, answer questions, and ask if the student wants a followup meeting after an essay or exam.
- **Understand the learning issue.** If an essay is incomprehensible, or an exam is a near failure, rather than covering it with comments or assigning an F, find out what the student understands through a discussion. What kind of comprehension issue is it—of the material or of English? Is it listening or reading? Did he or she grasp the assignment?
- **Consider culture shock:** students newly arrived are often physically and emotionally overwhelmed by the demands of a new language and culture. Speaking English requires constant effort and cultural differences assault the senses making early efforts at academic success non-representative of the student’s capacity once adjusted.
- **Assume intelligence.** It is easy to equate silence or chaotic writing with student weakness. Instead, realize that the student is most likely a top performer at home. His or her confusion or “failure” in English is not representative of academic potential. Educate yourself by getting to know that student.
- **Be patient.** Know that change is slow and improvement in conceptual sophistication usually leads to temporary language deterioration.
- **Have the student read a paragraph aloud and summarize his/her main point.** This is sometimes helpful if the student has internalized certain grammatical structures. Students can clarify their own points (and correct grammar) once they hear their own words if they know the structures. However, be aware that many mistakes are not yet ‘noticed’ as errors by language learners, and hearing them aloud may not be helpful in this case unless explicitly (and sparingly) pointed out as part of the learning process.
- **Together, make a simple outline of the argument** and the main evidence *before* reading the essay. Rephrase for the student what he or she is trying to say in English that more accurately uses academic norms.
- **Work with resources.**
 - Have students visit the English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Center where a student can work one-on-one with a writing tutor.
 - Comment on particular patters and urge them to work on them using Diana Hacker’s *Rules for Writers*, or Matthew Parfitt’s *Writing in Response*.