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CCCC Statement of Second Language Writing and Writers

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CCCC Position Statement

A statement on an education issue approved by the CCCC Executive Committee

CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers

*Conference on College Composition and Communication
January 2001, Revised November 2009, Reaffirmed November 2014*

Part One: General Statement

The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) recognizes the presence of a growing number of second language writers in institutions of higher education across North America, including technical colleges, two-year colleges, four-year institutions, and graduate programs. As colleges and universities have actively sought to increase the diversity of their student populations through recruitment of international students, and as domestic second language populations have grown, second language writers have become an integral part of writing courses and programs.

Second language writers include international visa students, refugees, and permanent residents as well as naturalized and native-born citizens of the United States and Canada. Many of these students have grown up speaking languages other than English at home, in their communities, and in schools; others began to acquire English at a very young age and have used it alongside their native languages. To many, English may be a third, fourth or fifth language. Many second language writers are highly literate in their first languages, while others have never learned to write in their mother tongues. Some are even native speakers of languages without a written form. Some students may have difficulty adapting to or adopting North American discursive strategies because the nature and functions of discourse, audience, and rhetorical appeals often differ across cultural, national, linguistic, and educational contexts. At the same time, however, other students--especially graduate students--are already knowledgeable about the discourse and content of their respective disciplines, even if their status as "international" or "second language" may mask their abilities. Furthermore, most second language writers are still in the process of acquiring syntactic and lexical competence—a process that will take a lifetime.

Second language writers take part in writing programs at all levels — from basic writing and first-year composition to professional writing and writing across the curriculum — as well as in writing centers and graduate programs. Many institutions provide intensive language programs and "sheltered" sections of second language composition. But students may be crowded out of such courses or may elect to take "mainstream" writing courses. Additionally, students who grew up using languages other than English may retain features of those languages in their English writing long after they leave their first-year writing courses. So, while students emerge as members of their fields through upper-division and graduate courses, they also continue to emerge as writers--often in ways unique to their cultural and linguistic backgrounds and educational and other social experiences.

For these reasons, we urge writing teachers and writing program administrators to

- Recognize and take responsibility for the regular presence of second language writers in writing classes, to understand their characteristics, and to develop instructional and administrative practices that are sensitive to their linguistic and cultural needs.
- Offer teacher preparation in second language writing theory, research, and instruction in the forms of graduate courses, faculty workshops, relevant conference travel, and, when possible, require such coursework or other similar preparation for instructors working with writers in a higher-education context.
- Offer graduate courses in second language writing theory, research, and instruction and, when possible, require such coursework or other similar preparation for instructors working with writers in a higher-education context.
- Investigate issues surrounding second language writing and writers in the context of writing programs, including first-year writing programs, undergraduate and graduate technical, creative, and theoretical writing courses, writing centers, and Writing Across the Curriculum programs.
- Include second language perspectives in developing theories, designing studies, analyzing data, and discussing implications of studies of writing.

In the following sections, we provide guidelines for instructors of writing and writing-intensive courses, for writing program administrators, and for teacher preparation.

Part Two: Guidelines for Writing and Writing-Intensive Courses

Class Size

Since working with second language writers often requires additional feedback and conference time with the instructor, enrollments in mainstream classes with a substantial number of second language writers should be reduced to a maximum of 20 students per class. In classes made up exclusively of second language writers, enrollments should be limited to a maximum of 15 students per class.

Writing Assignment Design

When designing assignments, instructors should avoid topics that require substantial background knowledge that is related to a specific culture or history that is not being covered by the course. Instructors should also be aware that sensitive topics, such as sexuality, criticism of authority, political beliefs, personal experiences, and religious beliefs, are subject to differing levels of comfort among students of different cultural and educational backgrounds. We encourage instructors to provide students with multiple options for successfully completing an assignment, such as by providing multiple prompts or allowing students to write in a variety of genres for completing the assignment. Instructors should provide clearly written assignments so that expectations are not left tacit.

Assessment

The evaluation of second language texts should take into consideration various aspects of writing (e.g., topic development, organization, grammar, word choice). Writing instructors should look for evidence of a text's rhetorically effective features, rather than focus only on one or two of these features that stand out as problematic. To reduce the risk of evaluating students on the basis of their cultural knowledge rather than their writing proficiency, students should be given several writing prompts to choose from when appropriate. Writing prompts for placement and exit exams should avoid cultural references that are not readily understood by people who come from various cultural backgrounds. When possible, instructors should provide students with a rubric which articulates assessment criteria. (See also the section on Writing Assignment Design and Teacher Preparation in this section.)

The Committee on Second Language Writing also supports the recommendations in the CCCC Position Statement on Writing Assessment. In particular, we endorse the idea that best assessment practices use multiple measures. As the Position Statement on Writing Assessment states, "writing ability must be assessed by more than one piece of writing, in more than one genre, written on different occasions, for different audiences, and responded to and evaluated by multiple readers as part of a substantial and sustained writing process." In addition, we echo the call that "best assessment practice [that] respect language variety and diversity and [assess] writing on the basis of effectiveness for readers, acknowledging that as purposes vary, criteria will as well." (See also <http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/writingassessment> [<http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/writingassessment>].)

Textual Borrowing

Textual ownership and the ownership of ideas are concepts that are culturally based and therefore not shared across cultures and educational systems. Further, "patchwriting," defined by Rebecca Moore Howard, as the copying of sections of texts, such as phrasings and sentence patterns, is a natural part of the process of learning to write in a second language. As with native English speaking students, second language students may plagiarize when they panic about getting an assignment completed in time or doubt their ability to complete the assignment competently. Plagiarism, at many universities across the nation, is attributed to practices that range from the wholesale taking of an entire text to the improper use of citation convention. To help second language writers avoid practices that violate these institutional policies, both first-year writing and writing-intensive instructors should teach and re-enforce U.S. expectations for textual borrowing and citation conventions so that these students are continuously learning this throughout their college careers. Instructors and administrators should not expect second language writers to philosophically grasp and perfectly execute these practices after a single lesson. We advocate that instructors take extra care when suspecting a second language writer of plagiarism, and take into consideration the student's cultural background, level of experience with North American educational systems, and confidence level for writing in English.

Teacher Preparation

Any writing course, including basic writing, first-year composition, advanced writing, and professional writing, as well as any writing-intensive course that enrolls any second language writers should be taught by an instructor who is able to identify and is prepared to address the linguistic and cultural needs of second language writers. This preparation may be offered through preparing future faculty programs, first-year composition programming for instructors, or faculty development programming offered through Writing Across the Curriculum programs, writing centers, ESL support services, or other campus initiatives. (More guidelines related to teacher preparation are provided in Part Four: Guidelines for Teacher Preparation and Preparedness.)

Resources for Teachers

Writing programs should provide resources for teachers working with second language writers, including textbooks and readers on the teaching of second language writing as well as reference materials such as dictionaries and grammar handbooks for language learners. Moreover, writing programs should encourage — and offer incentives for — teachers to attend workshops on teaching second language writers that are presented at professional conferences such as CCCC, NCTE, and Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). Writing programs without experts in second language writing are encouraged to seek consultation from disciplinary experts.

Part Three: Guidelines for Writing Programs

First-Year Composition

Placement

Decisions regarding the placement of second language writers into first-year writing courses should be based on students' writing proficiency rather than their race, native-language background, nationality, or immigration status. Nor should the decisions be based solely on the scores from standardized tests of general language proficiency or of spoken language proficiency. Instead, scores from the direct assessment of students' writing proficiency should be used, and multiple writing samples should be consulted whenever possible. Writing programs should work toward making a wide variety of placement options available—including mainstreaming, basic writing, and second language writing as well as courses that systematically integrate native and nonnative speakers of English, such as cross-cultural composition courses.

Placing residential second language students in appropriate college writing courses can be especially challenging because not all students self-identify as “ESL,” “multilingual” or “second language” students. Some students may welcome the opportunity to enroll in a writing course designated for second language writers for the additional language support while others may prefer to enroll in a mainstream first-year composition course. Due to these considerations, we advocate Directed Self-Placement as a means of determining the most appropriate placement for second language writers (for more information on Directed Self-Placement, see Royer and Gilles). Writing programs should inform students of the advantages and disadvantages of each placement option so that students can make informed decisions, and should make this opportunity available to both international and residential second language students.

Credit

Second language sections of first-year composition courses should be offered for credit that satisfies the college's or university's writing requirement. Second language writing courses prerequisite to required composition courses should be offered for credit that can be used toward satisfying the foreign-language requirement and should receive the same credit accorded other prerequisite composition courses.

Writing Across the Curriculum/Writing in the Disciplines Programs

Beyond the composition requirements, writing instruction, at some institutions, is encouraged or required to further promote academic literacy and prepare students for disciplinary discourse within and beyond the academy (this includes professional writing courses, often taught in English departments). Therefore, the literacy support of second language writers needs to extend beyond the composition requirement as well.

Institutions requiring undergraduates to complete writing-intensive courses across the curriculum should offer faculty development in second language writing that should include information about second language writing development, information about second language populations at the institution, approaches for designing writing assignments that are culturally inclusive, and approaches for assessing writing that are ethical in relation to second language writing. When possible, institutions are encouraged to design resources that accommodate their writing students who have moved beyond the first-year writing program (e.g., a campus with a large number of second language writers taking technical writing courses may develop a separate section for second language writers taught by an individual with expertise in both fields). Institutions requiring a writing assessment as a graduation requirement should design this writing assessment so that it is fair and equitable for second language writers.

Writing Centers

Writing centers offer crucial resources to second language students. These students often visit the writing center seeking support in understanding writing assignments, developing a piece of writing, and to gauge reader response to their writing. They may also seek input on interpreting teacher feedback or assessment and learning more about nuances of the English language. Therefore, it is imperative that writing centers model and discuss effective approaches for working with second language writers in tutor training, make available reference materials specific to language learners such as dictionaries on idiomatic English, and hire tutors with specialized knowledge in second language writing. Writing centers that hire multilingual tutors will have someone who can provide second language writing students with first-hand writing strategies as well as empathy.

Support for Graduate Students

At institutions with graduate programs, various writing administrators (especially WAC directors), second language acquisition specialists, and/or other informed advocates of second language writers should work closely with graduate programs enrolling second language writers to create discipline-specific writing support, such as a graduate writing fellows program, English for Academic Purposes courses, or English for Specific Purposes courses. In these courses second language writing graduate students can learn to examine discipline-specific discourse, and they can compose texts that will help them fulfill program requirements and participate in professionalization opportunities, in addition to learning academic English literacy conventions. Also second language graduate writers can benefit from a writing center with a staff well-versed in graduate-level literacy expectations and second language writing.

Part Four: Guidelines for Teacher Preparation and Preparedness

The teaching of writing occurs in multiple contexts, from the type of course (basic writing, first-year composition, professional writing, WAC/WID, graduate writing, writing centers and intensive English courses) to the media through which the course is taught (online classes, hybrid classes). As instructors prepare for these teaching contexts and student populations, they will need to consider some of the pedagogical assumptions that inform their practices. Writing instructor preparation needs to expand instructors' knowledge of writing issues in general, as well as how to specifically work with second language writers. Writing programs should encourage instructors to perceive their institutional roles as guides that will help all students develop their academic literacy by identifying the strengths and the issues that need the student's attention. To this end, second language writing should be integrated throughout the professional preparation and development programs of all writing teachers, whether that be through a practicum experience, through WAC workshops, or through writing center training. If case studies are used as a methodology, for example, students might also conduct case studies with second language writers. If observation is used, students should consider observing both NES and NNES students. If student texts are shared for analysis, both NES and NNES texts should be used.

Cultural Beliefs Related to Writing

Teacher preparation should include information about cultural beliefs related to writing. Second language writers often come from contexts in which writing is shaped by linguistic and cultural features different from their NES peers. Beliefs related to individuality versus collectivity, ownership of text and ideas, student versus teacher roles, revision, structure, the meaning of different rhetorical moves, writer and reader responsibility, and the roles of research and inquiry all impact how student writers shape their texts.

Assignments

Writing instructors should gain experience in reflecting on how writing assignments may tacitly include cultural assumptions or tacitly rely on knowledge of culturally-specific information. Writing instructors should also gain experience designing writing assignments with second language students in mind, considering topics that are culturally sensitive to second language writers and including directions easily understandable to multiple audiences. Discussions on assignment design might include scaffolding, creating benchmarks within larger projects, and incorporating additional resources such as the writing center. Discussions might also include methods for teaching students the multiple rhetorical elements that influence a text's rhetorical effectiveness, as well as reflections on students' negotiations between composing in a home country language (including variations of English) and composing in academic English.

Building on Students' Competencies

Teacher preparation programs should encourage instructors to identify strengths second language writers bring to the classroom. Instructors should look for opportunities to use students' current literacy practices as a foundation for teaching the expectations of academic literacy. For example, teaching writing with technology can give second language writing students an opportunity to build upon the literacy practices with which they are already familiar and comfortable. Those students who have access to technology can be relatively proficient with multiple applications, especially second language students who use the technology to keep in touch with home and reach out to people around the world. These students often demonstrate savvy rhetorical strategies, including the ability to communicate with others who write in other varieties of English. With the help of an instructor, second language writers can learn to bridge the strategies they use to communicate socially through digital media to the expectations of the academy. Therefore, instructors need to learn how to proficiently work with the writing tools and within the writing contexts that will help second language writers create these bridges. As in this case, instructors need to be trained to work with various writing media (e.g., computer programs) so that they can take advantage of these pedagogical opportunities.

Response

It may take more time for an instructor to "hear" what a second language writer is attempting to communicate through a piece of writing. Second language students may require more conferencing time with their teachers, so that teachers can discuss global issues first, and then attend to local issues. Teacher preparation should include discussion on how the prose second language writers produce can violate their aesthetic expectations for academic English; instructors, instead, should look for the textual features that are rhetorically effective, and prioritize two or three mechanical or stylistic issues that individual second language writers should focus on throughout the duration of the course. Teacher preparation should include discussion on how response tools, such as rubrics, conferencing, might consider these differences.

Sustaining the Conversation

Teacher preparation experiences are often held as meetings during an orientation, guest lectures by experts, faculty workshops, and graduate-level seminars. While there is value in single experience situations (e.g., a guest lecture, a single workshop, or a single class dedicated to second language issues), instructors will be better prepared to work with second language students if issues of second language writing and writers are a consistent feature that is re-enforced throughout their training in writing instruction, especially in-service training encouraged of all writing instructors.

Part Five: Considering L2 Writing Concerns in Local Contexts

The role English has assumed as the "*lingua franca*" of academic, business, political, and technical communication internationally has increased the demand for English instruction in global contexts. US colleges and their surrounding communities have grown considerably more diverse in recent years. Recent statistics collected by the US Census Bureau indicate that almost 20 % of the US population speaks a language other than English at home (*American FactFinder*). Writing programs should consider that students enrolled in US college composition courses—"ESL" or "mainstream"—as well as in writing and writing-intensive courses across the curriculum may vary in their linguistic backgrounds and their experiences with academic English. We recommend writing programs develop a better awareness of the language experiences of their students, including understanding the evolution of English—its fluidity and its global variation (i.e., World Englishes).

Building Awareness of Local Multilingual Populations

We recommend that writing programs familiarize themselves with the multilingual populations surrounding their institutions. Doing so not only provides valuable insight into the language experiences of some students in your writing programs, but it also could identify large multilingual populations wishing to matriculate into the college/university. Information on local populations can be collected from the US Census Bureau's American FactFinder website. Also, websites such as the National Center for Education Statistics provides data on the number of English Language Learners (ELL) receiving special services in area high schools, some of whom might aspire to enter the university one day. Such information can be collected and disseminated on a centrally managed university website for the benefit of both instructors within the composition program and other university faculty.

Collecting Information on Language Use and Language Background

Further, writing programs should actively seek to determine the language use and language backgrounds of their students, particularly since many universities often do not collect such information from multilingual students who enter the university from US high schools. Yearly surveys conducted across the sections of first-year writing could provide writing programs with insight into the language needs of students in their courses. Further, posting the results of these surveys on a centrally managed website could help educate faculty across the university on the language needs and backgrounds of their students.

Encouraging Cross-Institutional Collaborations

For many resident second language students, the journey from secondary school to postsecondary is often met with awkward or inconsistent transitions (Harklau). Writing teachers and writing program administrators would benefit greatly from developing a better understanding of these students' experiences prior to entering the college or university setting. One way to begin to learn about those experiences and to facilitate a more fluid journey across these educational contexts is to create more opportunities for cross-institutional collaborations with secondary schools and local secondary school teachers. Some possibilities for encouraging such collaborations might include bridge programs for local second language students, writing center outreach to local schools, and collaborations with English teacher education programs.

For more information, see the NCTE Position Paper on the Role of English Teachers in Educating English Language Learners (ELLs): <http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/teacherseducatingell> [<http://www.ncte.org/positions/statements/teacherseducatingell>]

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