

# New Challenges in the Composition Classroom: A Debate on International Students' Writings<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Recently the number of international students in English-speaking universities has grown dramatically. According to the Institute of International Education (2010), there are the total of 690,923 international students in the U.S., and at the University of Washington in particular, international students comprise 19% of its incoming Freshman class in the academic year of 2011-2012 (Office of Admissions, University of Washington). This diverse student population is changing how English Composition instructors approach students' written works. In some cases, instructors tend to perceive these students' language use as problematic as it differs from the expected standards required for academic success in the U.S. Specifically, these international students' writings are seen as a challenge in terms of grammar correctness and linguistic appropriateness. On the other hand, as observed by many other instructors and argued by Composition scholars, these students also bring in rich intercultural knowledge and linguistic creativity that contribute to classroom learning in the globalizing society (e.g., Matsuda, 2003; Canagarajah, 2006).

Given this changing demographic in students' population, opening up this debate among English writing instructors is currently needed. On the one hand we need to understand the challenges we are likely to face if we were to respond to students' "errors." On the other hand we should value the linguistic and cultural diversity the students bring. To illustrate this polemic argument, we chose the format of a dialogue aligning with a recent focus on narratives in education studies (Nelson, 2011). Narratives of classroom life, as Nelson defines it, are "the type that blend analysis with artistry in forms of plays, poems, stories." Experimenting with creative forms such as play scripts and poems to present her research, Nelson made a strong case that narratives can "further democratise knowledge production and exchange, illuminating subtle yet vital dimensions of classroom interactions, and prompting imaginative interpretations and revisionings" (p.463). Similarly, to address the central issue in this paper, we also found one creative narrative form - dialogue - powerful, as it foregrounds the real concerns novice Composition instructors face daily and provides a platform to open up the debate with the audience.

The following section will present the debate in the form of a dialogue between two characters that embody multiple viewpoints from novice Composition instructors, TESOL professionals, and researchers of second language writing. Each character will present a view held and supported by previous research and based on what they saw in their students' writings. "Xuan" will mostly represent the views reflected by a novice Composition instructor, whereas "Norah"

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represents the views presented by a TESOL professional. Although we use our names for the characters, the views they hold may not be our personal perspectives. Through our characters we seek to highlight contrasting responses that different Composition instructors may have to a student's writing.

As Composition instructors, we need to ask ourselves how we should best channel our students' knowledge to better serve their learning process and our teaching experience. In presenting the two most dominant views towards these students' writing problems, our dialogue strives to reach a middleground. As Dana Ferris (2008) puts it appropriately: "we language professionals may rest in our enlightened awareness that language acquisition takes time, and that progress and not perfection should be our objective, the realities and expectations of the world outside our classrooms often pressure us to reach that unattainable goal" (p. 91-92). The dialogue also seeks to provide Composition instructors with strategies and solutions to help their international students address the gap between academic expectations, and what they are currently capable of.

### **A Debate on International Students' Writings**

Xuan: I'm so overwhelmed with my students' papers!

Norah: What? Up all night grading?

Xuan: It's so time consuming this quarter as almost a third of my students are international students - I mean their native language isn't English! Check out this paragraph: How do I give feedback here?

*"With experiences growth and expanding range of communication, did people never ask themselves whom you are when they talk with different people? People all know when you are facing with different groups of people there is an identity conversion, which is influenced by your growing background and the immediate environment. However, the most obvious way shows identities conversions are those languages you are using. At the same time, multilingual speakers are a group of people must be the best understanding and experience with a strong conflict between the languages and identity daily."*

Norah: Well...Why do you think this sentence is problematic? Seems pretty good to me.

Xuan: Come on! Look at all these grammar errors. And I am an English Composition teacher who should tackle grammar issues in my class, but what about professors in other departments who are teaching other subjects? How can they respond to these kinds of writings? Have a look at my feedback here:

"With experiences growth and expanding range of communication, did people ever ask themselves whom you are when they talk with different people? People all know when you are faced with different groups of people there is an identity conversion, which is influenced by your growing background and the immediate environment. However, the most obvious way that shows identities conversions are those languages you are using. At the same time, multilingual speakers are a group of people who must have the best understanding and experience of a strong conflict between languages and identity daily."

- xuaner 4/7/12 8:39 AM  
Comment (1): Parallel structure
- xuaner 4/7/12 8:39 AM  
Comment (2): tense
- xuaner 4/7/12 8:39 AM  
Comment (3): negation
- xuaner 4/7/12 8:39 AM  
Comment (4): previous agreement
- xuaner 4/7/12 8:20 AM  
Deleted: never
- xuaner 4/7/12 8:39 AM  
Comment (5): passive voice; tense
- xuaner 4/7/12 8:21 AM  
Deleted: ing
- xuaner 4/7/12 8:39 AM  
Comment (6): word choice
- xuaner 4/7/12 8:39 AM  
Comment (7): clause
- xuaner 4/7/12 8:39 AM  
Comment (8): clause
- xuaner 4/7/12 8:39 AM  
Comment (9): verb choice
- xuaner 4/7/12 8:38 AM  
Deleted: be
- xuaner 4/7/12 8:39 AM  
Comment (10): pronoun/it
- xuaner 4/7/12 8:39 AM  
Comment (11): article
- xuaner 4/7/12 8:38 AM  
Deleted: with
- xuaner 4/7/12 8:38 AM  
Deleted: the

Norah: Oh, well now that you've given all that feedback of course it looks pretty bad. Well I honestly see this as a promising sentence. True, it's not the type of writing you expect, but tell me more about this assignment. What is the context and where is this sample from?

Xuan: This is a 5-7 page argument paper on how to support multilingual speakers in the U.S. Before this assignment we read and wrote on the issue of multilingualism in the U.S., and interviewed immigrant and international students. This is the first thing I saw in the opening paragraph.

Norah: So who's the author of this paper?

Xuan: She is a freshman student from China. She is much better at talking in English instead of writing it down; She seems to be a novice writer. She is excellent in participating verbally in my class...

Norah: Alright, that's important information to know before we start commenting on her writing... I understand your frustration, but given that you have many international students in your class, can you really continue giving feedback this way?

Xuan: Well, no, that's why sometimes I stop commenting at all because there are too many errors!

Norah: Well, let's think about this...Is it practical to insist that her writing is full of errors that *must* be corrected? Is language a static entity and is there only one correct form across varieties?

Xuan: Well I understand there are varieties of languages such as regional dialects, slangs and etc . But as a Composition teacher, I am responsible to teach Standard

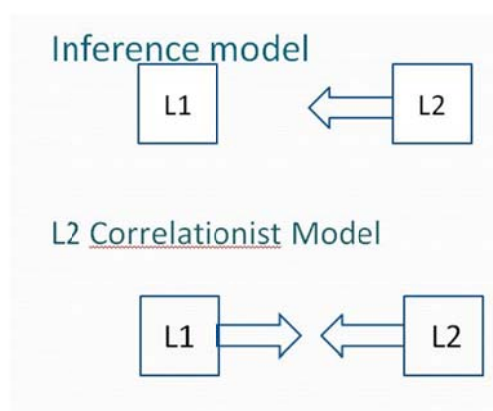
Academic English. There are teachers out there who believe in teaching grammar and academic conventions. Professor Stanley Fish at Florida International University was frustrated at his graduate students' "inability to write a clean English sentence." He complained about how college Composition classes teach too much about social issues instead of writing itself, and insisted that "all courses listed as courses in Composition teach grammar and rhetoric and nothing else" (Fish, 2009). Another widely held argument is that Standard English can lead to career and job success. It is seen that allowing the so-called "linguistic diversity" actually deprives multilingual speakers of the "linguistic tools" that help them take full advantage of the economic opportunities (e.g. Lewis, 2005, p.196).

Norah: I agree to some extent. Realistically, it will take a long time for the standards to change to accommodate other varieties of English like I mentioned, especially in academic writings. Sure a lot of us would like to correct the errors, and arm L2 students with the academic standards they need to compete with native speakers. However, how practical are you being and are you helping your students really by either giving *all* of this feedback you just showed me or none at all?

Xuan: Well what do you suggest I do then?

Norah: Here is how I am starting to rethink my pedagogy as a Composition teacher: Is learning writing just about errors and correct form, or is it about something broader, knowing what discourses to use in what situations, knowing how to use language to negotiate who you are as a writer and achieving some sort of rhetorical expertise? I mean the growing presence of international students is a fact. They have been admitted to the university and passed the required standards with the language proficiency they possess. We need to rethink our own roles and responsibilities to meet the pedagogical needs of these students so as to ensure that they are not being set up to fail. I know it sounds kind of out there right now, but let me try to convince you using Canagarajah's negotiation model (2006).

Xuan: Yeah, I know the "inference model" and the "correlationist model" (Canagarajah, 2006, p.590).

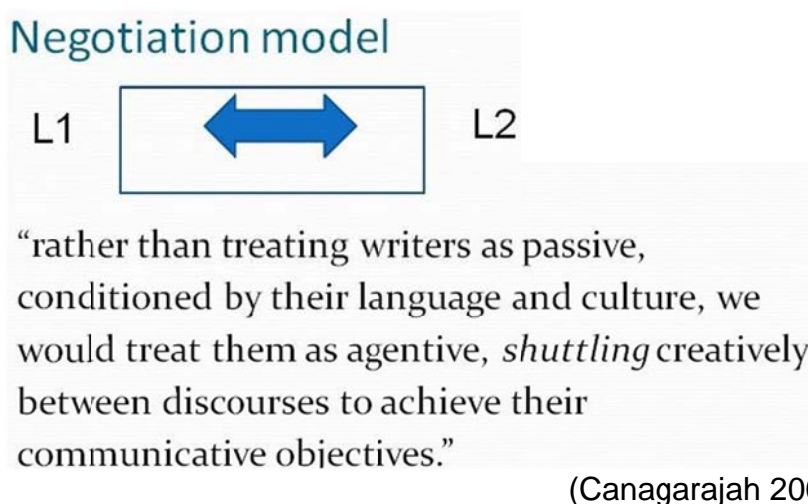


(Canagrajah, 2006, p.590)

The "inference model" refers to studies that assume any peculiarity in L2 students' English writing is influenced by their L1 language and culture. As in early studies

of Contrastive Rhetoric (e.g. Kaplan, 1996), scholars using this model think that, for example, Chinese students organize their papers in a circular way because Asian culture is indirect and circular. The “correlationist model” made some progress here by considering that some of the peculiarities could be just developmental; for example, native speakers of English but novice writers also write circularly. Instead of analyzing L2 students’ English writings, they analyze texts in L1 to show evidence of any L1-L2 transfer (Canagarajah, 2006, p.590). Both of the models follow a monolingualist assumption, which, I heard, was questioned by the “negotiation model.” Can you explain this model to me?

Norah: So, the “negotiation model” explains that writers have agency, and it’s not merely an “unconscious error”. I’ll explain more but first, have a look at this diagram I often refer to:



Norah: I know there are issues with your students’ paragraph, but I also know you’re assigning more than one draft right?

Xuan: Yes.

Norah: OK so Canagarajah explains that we should “study the movement of the writer between languages; rather than studying the product for descriptions of writing competence, we (should) study the *process* of composing in multiple languages...we have to stop treating any textual difference as an unconscious error.” Based on Canagarajah’s suggestion it is best to view students as having agency in their writing and that they are making conscious choices when creatively moving from one discourse to another. Students’ writing should not be seen as a result of passivity and influence from their culture and language, nor should their writing be considered as static and locked within their L1 (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 590-591).

To illustrate his points, Canagarajah studied a bilingual professor writing three research papers on the same topic in his L1 (Tamil) and L2 (English) to a local and a foreign audience. He found that there are greater differences in the two English papers that are directed at different audiences, than the papers written in different languages but to the same audience. This comparison should show us that language doesn't determine the greatest difference in the texts of multilingual authors, but rather context or audience. So basically, Canagarajah argues that the

“negotiation model” is more accurate, as it allows us to focus more on the process of composing in more than one language, the multiple competencies the writer obtains, and the changing contexts of communication between languages and cultures (2006, p 590).

Xuan: This model reminds me of the *Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC)* 1974 resolution declaring “Students’ Right to Their Own Language.” Now more than 30 years later, in a recent issue of *College English* I have also read Horner and other scholars proposing a “translingual approach,” similar to this “negotiation model.” According to Horner et al., a “translingual approach” insists on “viewing language differences and fluidities as resources to be preserved, developed, and utilized. Rather than respond to language differences only in terms of rights, it sees them as resources” (Horner et al., 2011, p. 304). Are you saying here we as teachers should value our students’ linguistic differences as assets instead of deficiency? And we should consider more of the context they are writing in?

Norah: Yes!

Xuan: I think I get what you’re saying now, but as a teacher what can I practically do to help my students with their writing? What should I do if I don’t correct their grammar errors?

Norah: Well, there are several options which I find best exemplified in Ferris’s (2006) article entitled “Students Must Learn to Correct All Their Writing Errors” (as a myth!). Ferris first provides a brief accessible overview on recent research related to L2 writing with a focus on instructor feedback. She goes on to provide a number of practical suggestions for giving written feedback to L2 writers. Here is a list of suggestions from Ferris (2006) that I find particularly useful when working with my students on their writing:

**Suggestions from Ferris (p. 96):**

- 1- Give students time to do their best work.
- 2- Help students understand the importance of taking time to think, write and revise.
- 3- Teach self-editing strategies, such as reading papers aloud, finding a proofreader, and looking for specific error types one at a time.
- 4- Hold students accountable for self-editing.
- 5- Provide expert feedback that focuses on each student's area of greatest need and calls it to their attention and that moves students toward increasing autonomy in self-editing.
- 6- Understand the limitations of in-class grammar instruction and prioritize self-editing strategies.

(Ferris, 2006, p. 96)

Xuan: Can you show me an example of how to teach self-editing strategies?

Norah: An error log, for example, is a good way to learn self-editing strategies. Here is an example from one of my students’ error logs. As you can see this

student kept a record of her grammar issues and self-edited them throughout the quarter.

## Error Log

Error (in context):	Correct form:	Category (correction symbol)	Assignment title:
The author he claims that math is fun.	The author claims that math is fun.	Pronoun (pron)	Dropbox 1
The biology is difficult	Biology is difficult	Article (art)	Essay # 1
I concern about you	I <u>care</u> about you	Wrong word (w.w.)	Major paper # 1
Defanately	Definitely	Spelling (sp)	Short paper # 2
in next 90 years	in the next 90 years	Article (art)	Short paper 1-2
contributes the world	contributes to the world	Prep	Short Paper 1-2
expressed the audience	impressed the audience	WW	Short Paper 1-2
a part of country identity	a part of national identity	W-f	Short Paper 1-2
the languages	languages	art	Short Paper 1-2
Negative consequences	negative consequences	(#)	Short Paper 1-2
with not perfect...	without perfect ...	WW	Short Paper 1-1
In this way...	Because of ...	?	SP1-1
space time	spare time	sp	SP1-1
At his point	At this point	sp	SP1-1
reason less	not reasonable	?	SP1-1
but also	but	WW	SP1-1
where born and grows up	where born and grew up	t	SP1-1
so poor to express	too poor to express	prep	SP1-1
medias	media	#	MP2

Norah: Also Ferris gives us some suggestions and hopes for improvement from two studies she conducted. In the first study students managed to properly self-edit their writing out of class at a success rate of 82% when their errors were pointed out to them but not actually corrected by their instructors. Also in another controlled experimental study Ferris discovered that in cases where teachers gave their students feedback by highlighting errors in five specific categories, their students were able to successfully address their errors instantly 56% of the time (Ferris 2008). So even if students can't achieve 100% percent accuracy throughout a quarter, there are some promising figures that show how with indirect error feedback students are able to improve their writing. I find these results quite promising, though consistency in your feedback methods is crucial as I found out in my classes.

Xuan: I understand this approach now, but I am still a little confused here. Even my international students often complain that they need help with grammar but can't get help at the writing center. They claim that they want to be corrected.

Norah: It's important that you take the time to discuss this with your students and see why they have this need to have their errors corrected. This need for error correction is also a myth constructed by students' previous educational experience: sentence level accuracy is overtly emphasized in EFL settings, and a survey of these students suggested that they tend to see their writing problems as sentence-level problems as opposed to content area or organizational issues. Mohan and

Lo's research (1985) has supported this point of view by studying the composition practices Chinese students received in Hong Kong and British Columbia.

Xuan: I see. That is to say, the students' perceptions of their own writing are heavily influenced by the way they were taught in school. If teachers ask them to critically examine their learning experience and what has led to the rhetoric differences as you suggested earlier, they can be more aware of the reality. For instance, this is what my student said after a quarter-long discussion of this issue.

*"Morita's research leads to another question about how U.S. professors should grade multilingual students' writings. In the New York Times article, Professor John Webster, director of writing at the university's College of Arts and Science, believes that professors should focus less on trying to make their English technically correct and more on making their essays understandable and interesting (New York Times). This suggests that when professors grade non-native speakers' writing, they should pay more attention on their ideas not their grammars."*

Norah: Now that sounds promising! There's more to talk about but I've got to run now. See you soon and good luck!

Xuan: Yes, we'll see what happens the rest of this quarter with these new ideas in mind. Bye for now!

## **Conclusion**

By adopting some of the suggestions discussed in the dialogue, we as Composition instructors were delighted to see our international students became more outspoken and fluent writers by the end of a ten-week-long course. As they wrote in their final reflection for the course: "... these writing skills I learned from this class will make me a better-qualified writer in the future." "...I am able to revise, edit and proofread my article on my own." "Not only the minor grammatical mistakes have been corrected, but more importantly, I was able to expand my thinking even further when doing the revision." Further research is needed here to measure how our methods of responding to students' writings are improving their confidence and writing ability. Moreover we need to investigate whether our students find our method of feedback effective or not. We are contemplating a classroom discussion where students compare different feedback methods they have received generally and which of these methods suit their learning best. Granted this discussion presents only the beginning of a conversation on how to best address all questions and concerns expressed by many Composition instructors when working with international students. We understand that each university setting has unique circumstances and that our suggestions worked best for our university context. We do however believe that similar discussions should take place across English Composition departments. There is a need to break the often 'silent' concern that many novice and experienced English Composition instructors grapple with when deciding on how to best give feedback to their international students' writings.



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## **Appendix One: Resources for multilingual students**

### **Where can students find outside support?**

- Writing Centers (OWRC, CLUE)
- Outside support courses
- Online resources

### **Writing Centers**

- Up to 80/90% of writing center users are multilingual students.
- Writing centers can be a valuable resource for students to receive one-on-one feedback.
- Students will receive rhetorical instruction similar to what we provide: a focus on organization, argument, tone, style.
- Proofreading is NOT provided—but in some cases, students can get grammatical feedback.
- OWRC is a good resource during the day, my students have had great success with CLUE's evening sessions.
- It's useful to offer "extra credit" to encourage students to visit the writing center. It is a great opportunity for shy students to improve their participation grade and for you, as the instructor, to get feedback on how the students are using the writing centers.

### **Outside Support Courses:**

- Studio Courses: offer reading and writing support for multilingual students.
  - o 2-credit (C/NC) workshops.
  - o General Studies 391; meets 2 days/week for 50 minutes.
- OWRC Targeted Tutoring: offer group sessions for 4-5 multilingual students on a regular basis with a writing tutor.
  - o 1-credit (C/NC) session.
  - o General Studies credit; meets 1 day/wk.
- Academic English Program (AEP) courses: many immigrant and international students already pass through AEP classes (Engl 101-4).

### **Online Resources:**

- **OWRC website: Writing Resources**
  - o <http://depts.washington.edu/owrc/WritingResources.html>. This page includes many handouts and writing resources for writing instructors. It also includes a handout for ESL students with information and links to online resources.
- **Ask Betty – Grammar for College Writers**
  - o <http://depts.washington.edu/engl/askbetty/index.php> This useful website (based in the English department) allows students to submit questions, learn how to resolve common grammatical mistakes, and how to decipher instructor feedback.
- **Purdue OWL: English as a Second Language**
  - o <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/section/5/> Provides a number of resources for ESL teachers and tutors as well as grammar and writing exercises.
- **University of North Carolina Writing Center: Academic Writing resources:**

- o <http://writingcenter.unc.edu/> -Contains a useful section for ELLs (English Language learners)
- **Dave's ESL Café**
- o <http://www.eslcafe.com/students/> Provides grammar exercises and quizzes, vocabulary, and a student forum. It can be a good resource for students to use to continue learning once their errors are identified (i.e. thru the Error Log).
- **Brief Introduction to Resources for UW ELL/international students and their teachers Catalyst page** (a developing online resource developed by Elizabeth Simmons, Assistant Director, Expository Writing)
- o <https://catalyst.uw.edu/workspace/esoneill/21763/133719>
- **Coming soon:** an online resource from the Expository Writing Program (EWP) with in-class materials and resources to help teachers working with ELLs. For more up to date information on this resource please contact [nfahim@uw.edu](mailto:nfahim@uw.edu) or [xuanzh@uw.edu](mailto:xuanzh@uw.edu)

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