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## **PREPARING ELL WRITERS FOR BECOMING MULTILINGUAL WRITERS: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES**

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**Summary.** The increasing number of international students enrolled in higher education in English-speaking countries has presented the growing need to support their academic writing development. It, however, has often led to the hasty assumption that English language learner (ELL) writers need to quickly adopt the dominant academic writing conventions in order to succeed in an English-speaking academic community. Even though the growing number of scholars have started to pay attention to ELL writers' diverse writing styles and multiple identities, little research and discussion have taken place on how language practitioners could engage ELL writers in developing their voices as multilingual and multicultural writers. By analyzing a qualitative interview with ten experienced writing consultants and instructors, this paper explores major challenges that ELL writers experience and different strategies that could effectively help them develop their voices as writers in the academic context where English is dominantly used as the medium of instruction. Findings show that while many colleges and universities in English-speaking countries still adopt a monolithic view and label ELL writers as 'a troubled non-native writer', it is crucial for writing consultants and instructors to acknowledge ELL writers' multilingual background and help them to develop their unique voices and achieve sustainable development and progress.

**Keywords:** English language learners; multilingual sustainability; multilingual writers; second language writing; writer agency.

### **Introduction**

In the context of neo-globalization and late-capitalism where national boundaries have become blurry (Appadurai, 1990), many colleges and universities in English-speaking countries, have experienced a rapid influx of international students. Since the rate of international students has grown rapidly in many English-speaking countries over the past three decades, the acquisition of academic literacy among these students has become a vibrant issue among school administrators, instructors and professors. Although more and more universities and colleges have expanded their English-as-a-second-language (ESL) programs and writing courses and offer seminars and workshops exclusively designed for international students as an attempt to help them, various difficulties and struggles of international students in the process of their academic literacy acquisition have been largely

addressed by many scholars (e.g., Andrade, 2006; Cheong, 2006; Curry, 2004; Krathanos & Mena, 2014; Sherry et al., 2010). The urgent needs of supporting their academic writing have been especially emphasized in that academic writing plays a significant role to influence international students' academic success or failure in an English-speaking academic setting (e.g., Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Canagarajah, 2002, 2004; Cotterall, 2010; Zhang & Mi, 2009).

The growing need to support international students' academic writing development, however, has often led to the hasty assumption that they are 'different' and 'problematic' compared to native English-speaking counterparts, and they need to quickly adopt 'Western', 'British' or 'North American' academic writing conventions in order to succeed in an English-speaking academic community (Matsuda, 2012; Kiedaisch & Dinitz, 2007). In problematizing such a view that perceives English language learner (ELL)<sup>1</sup> writers as a problem, Matsuda et al. (2013) urge scholars and practitioners to embrace the diversity ELL writers bring to writing practice and an academic setting, and to guide them in appreciating their linguistic and cultural diversities, finding their voices as a multilingual writers, and achieving sustainable development in language learning. Even though the growing number of scholars and language practitioners have started to pay attention to ELL writers' diverse writing styles and multiple identities, little research and discussion have taken place on how teachers and language practitioners could actively engage ELL writers in developing their voices and identities as multilingual writers in an English-speaking academic community.

By analyzing a qualitative interview with ten experienced writing consultants and instructors, the paper explores major challenges that ELL writers experience in an English-speaking academic community and different strategies that could effectively help ELL writers develop their voices and identities as writers in the academic context where English is dominantly used

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<sup>1</sup> English language learner (ELL) refers to students who are less proficient in English than in their first language and require instructional support to meet the academic demands of school (Ballantyne et al., 2008). In this paper, ELL specifically indicates international students who enter schools with a first language other than English and who generally need instructional support in order to take full advantage of academic instruction in English.

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as the medium of instruction. Findings show that while many colleges and universities in English-speaking countries still adopt a monolithic view and label ELL writers as 'a troubled non-native writer', it is crucial for writing consultants and instructors to acknowledge ELL writers' multilingual background and help them to develop their unique voices and identities in the new academic sphere. The discussion presented in this paper helps language researchers, educators, policymakers and school administrators in higher education to better understand the growing number of ELL writers and the kinds of supports and guidance they would need in order to become competent writer in an English-speaking academic community and achieve sustainable development and progress.

## **The Present Study**

### **Research Site**

The study was conducted in Midwest University, one of the largest U.S. public universities where international students comprised 15% of the total undergraduate students and 36% of graduate students. As one of the leading universities in terms of accepting international students, Midwest University provides various language programs and supports for ELL students, including ESL programs and the English writing center. Even though Midwest University generally promotes diversity and multilingualism, it publicly depicts international students as 'non-native' English speakers in various university policy documents.

In addition, in order to work as a teaching assistant, international students are required to meet the expected score on English proficiency screening assessments and interview while constant supervision and monitoring by the department was recommended to monitor their English language proficiency. All in all, international students in Midwest University are surrounded by the discourse of native speakerism that regards native speakers as authentic language speakers while posits non-native speakers as inauthentic and unskilled language speakers (Holliday, 2005, 2006; Holliday & Abshiha, 2009).

In order to support the academic literacy development of students, Midwest University offers academic writing tutoring and writing seminars through the university-affiliated writing center. All the students, both ELL students and those whose first language is English are eligible to use academic writing tutorial session twice a week with an advance appointment, which usually needs to be made a week ahead due to its popularity. The number of ELL writers consists of more than 70% of the total visitors of the writing center. Even though writing centers tend to be in a position where their role as literacy sponsors is less valued compared to other university-based language programs, the distinct service of hour-long and one-on-one tutorial session provided by the writing center offers a unique space to ELL writers where they can negotiate their writings in collaboration with a writing consultant rather than simply following imposed academic conventions and fixing their writing 'errors' accordingly (Mahala, 2007). In addition, the fact that writing consultants are not involved in evaluating student writers' writings can allow ELL writers to voice out their 'different' thoughts and ideas, and to become more autonomic.

## **Participants**

Participants of this study include ten writing consultants and instructors in Midwest University. All the participants are experienced writing consultants who have been working as a full-time consultant at the university-affiliated writing center between two and eight years. Most of the participants also have the experience of working as a writing instructor in a college-level writing course, including an ESL writing course and a university freshmen composition course. Among ten participants, five of them identify themselves as a bilingual; one participant uses Korean as her mother tongue and four participants use Spanish as their second language.

Participants were recruited from among writing consultants who worked as a full-time writing consultant at the university-affiliated writing center at the time of data collection. Throughout the research period, I positioned myself as an insider researcher as I knew all the participants, having worked with them professionally over two years. My position as an insider

researcher and an experienced writing consultant enabled me to better understand and analyze participants' experiences (Adler & Adler, 1987; Kanuha, 2000).

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data was obtained through qualitative interview. Since qualitative interviews allow researchers to have a more in-depth understanding of participants' experiences and perceptions (Rubin & Rubin, 2004), I conducted qualitative interviews with all the participants to understand their experiences with ELL writers. Participants were asked to describe their experiences of dealing with various ELL writers they had encountered as a writing consultant and instructor and share their own strategies they had developed for helping ELL writers cope with major challenges associated with their writing and writing practices scaffolding ELL writers. Each interview lasted one hour on average and was carried out face-to-face. All the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for further analysis. The qualitative interview data was analyzed using the ground theory method (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to organize the data and uncover recurring themes and concepts.

### **What is Happening?: Labeling ELL Writers as a Problem**

Many studies criticize the essentialist view that frame ELL writers as 'troubled' or 'non-traditional' writers who need to quickly adopt 'dominant' and 'traditional' writing rules that are valued in an English-speaking academic setting. Matsuda (2012), for example, shares an anecdote where the ELL writer is labeled as 'failing' in the college despite multiple perspectives and interesting ideas he has, because he could not present them in the socially and academically expected and valued form of writing. He elsewhere warns the danger of the prevalent discourse of linguistic homogeneity—"the tacit and wide-spread acceptance of the dominant image of composition students as native speakers of a privileged variety of English" (Matsuda, 2006, p. 638). That is, it is often the case that mainstream instructors and ESL teachers hold a strong belief that the quick acquisition of Western/British/North American

writing style is beneficial to ELL writers and their academic advancement in the new academic setting. It might be true that adopting dominant writing rules and convention could help ELL writers achieve better grades in their academic work, but yet it cannot help them develop their own voices and identities as multilingual writers who can incorporate diverse writing styles, perspectives and identities into their writings (Canagarajah, 2002, 2004 for further discussion).

All the participants during the interviews shared their observations and experiences with ELL writers who are struggling with their imposed or self-imposed label of 'a troubled non-native writer'. These ELL writers often receive multiple comments and feedback from their instructors or sometime from their advisors saying that their writing needs to be 'fixed' and 'corrected' in accordance with the dominant writing convention. According to the participants, many ELL writers come to the writing consulting session, bringing instructors' comments such as 'your writing does not sound academic enough', 'your writing needs to be cleaned' and 'get your paper proofread' (c.f., Karathanos & Mena, 2014; Rafoth, 2015). Such comments and feedback tend to guide or force ELL writers to perceive their diverse linguistic backgrounds as deficit and problematic and allow them little room for developing their unique voices and identities as multilingual writers in a new academic setting. Participants also point out that ELL writers who have an experience of receiving negative feedback regarding their writings tend to easily blame their poor and non-traditional writings for their failing grades even though other variables might cause them to receive lower grades. According to participants, ELL writers who have been constantly exposed to the native and non-native dichotomy tend to consider their 'bad' and 'non-native' writing styles as a problem and a source of interference.

### **What Could Be Done?: The Role of Academic Literacy Sponsors**

As Ferris et al. (2011) point out, despite the growing number of ELL writers in higher education, there has been a lack of professional preparation where "a few of the instructors either were almost entirely unaware of having L2 writers in their classes or, if they were aware, felt strongly that students'

language backgrounds were irrelevant” (p. 219). In other words, a lack of professional preparation among instructors and limited awareness towards ELL writers has been consciously or unconsciously marginalized ELL writers’ diverse backgrounds and literacy practices and treat them as a troubled writer.

In order to help ELL writers develop their own voices and agency as multilingual writers, all the participants emphasized the needs of giving enough room to them rather than asking or forcing them to simply follow dominant rules or writing conventions. It is especially important for ELL writers who are constantly asked to follow a certain way of writing that may or may not be similar to what they were used to, and who are oftentimes labeled as poor writers who need immediate help. The following section introduces three major approaches and strategies that could effectively help ELL writers position themselves as multilingual writers who see the value their unique voices and who enable to incorporate their diverse linguistic backgrounds and perspectives in their writings.

### **A. Help ELL Writers Be More Confident in Their Writings**

Throughout the interview, all the participants who have extensive experiences with ELL writers agreed that many ELL writers come to the writing consulting session looking highly stressed with a relatively low self-confidence as a writer. Elisa, a former ESL writing instructor and an experienced writing consultant, remembers one ELL student she had one week before the interview took place, who constantly called himself a terrible writer and kept apologizing to her about the fact that he was not smart enough to be a better writer. She recalls that his writing was fine and well-organized but there were some minor grammar issues, which could be easily revised:

“Sometimes, writing consulting sessions quickly turn into counseling session. ELL writers tend to highly blame themselves and keep saying that they are bad writers and they are not intelligent. I try to assure them that they are a good writer. They might have grammar issues here and there, but their writings totally make sense.” (Interview with Elisa)

She emphasizes the importance of providing constant encouragement and

positive affirmation to ELL writers who can easily blame themselves for their failing grade or 'different' and hence 'wrong' writing style. Lucy who had been working at the writing center for three years also points out that it is important to see ELL writers as someone in the process of adopting a different writing convention and developing their identities as writers in the new academic setting, rather than merely treating them as unskilled writers. She says that ELL writers tend to already experience discouraging moments as writers such as receiving negative comments from their instructors, being asked to hire someone who could proofread their papers, so they are in a fragile position where they often see their diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds as a source of interference.

Based on their experiences, writing consultants suggest following strategies to help ELL writers become more confident in their writings: (a) *provide positive affirmation* (e.g., 'you are a great writer.', 'it makes perfect sense when you put it this way.', 'your idea is really interesting and unique. '), (b) *combine both positive and negative feedback* (e.g., 'even though there are several sentences we need to work on, your writing is very well-organized.', 'I know there are some clarity issues, but your idea is clearly stated. '), (c) *assume that they fully know what they are writing about even though there is a communication issue*, and (d) *remind ELL writers they are in charge of their writings* (e.g., 'you are the expert in this topic and I am not, so I might ask you some questions in order to fully understand your writing.', 'you are the expert in this topic, so you would know what kinds of field-specific expressions and jargon you need to use, and where to use them').

## **B. Help ELL Writers See the Value of Their Diversities**

Because Contrast Rhetoric (CR) studies heavily focus on comparing differences and similarities between ELL writers and native English-speaking writers, a long existence of CR in the field of writing studies and language teaching has widely produced a stereotypical and static image associated with a particular group of ELL writers. Indeed, it is not difficult to find tutorial and training materials for ESL teachers, which include sentences such as 'All the Japanese students write in a uniform manner that is different from Western students', and 'All Chinese



students think and write in this way' (see Canagarajah, 2002 for more details). Such view is dangerous because it not only overlooks the diversity of ELL writers' writing styles but also provides teachers an essentialist understanding of ELL writers and hence makes it hard for them to appreciate ELL writers' diverse backgrounds.

Anne who joined the writing center two years ago still remembers how surprised she was when she first witnessed such diverse and exciting perspectives and writing styles the ELL writers brought to their writings and writing sessions. In problematizing the over-simplistic and essentialist approach to frame ELL writers as someone who shares a same writing style, she argues that ELL writers cannot be simply generalized as a homogenous group because different writing styles exist among ELL writers.

"[Before joining the writing center], I had a very little exposure to ELL writers and held a very limited vision of what their writings would be like. I used to think that Asians write that way and Latinos write that way. And when I started to work in the writing center, I realized how narrow and restricted my thoughts had been. I was so wrong. You cannot simply generalize ELL's writings. People just say that these students are from Russia so they will write this way, but it is not true. Every single ELL writer has his or her own writing style just as all the so-called native speakers have their own styles to write". (Interview with Anne)

Other writing consultants also agree that ELL writers' diverse voices can be easily blamed for their poor writing by their instructors or even by themselves, and many of them have been repeatedly heard that they need to develop "American ways of thinking" not "Chinese or Korean ways". Mina, a Korean-English bilingual writing consultant who has worked at the writing center for eight years, shares how her perspective towards ELL writers has shifted:

"When I started to work in the writing center, my whole focus was on how to correct their writings or how to make their writings sound more like American writing. It became too burdensome because I myself was not quite sure what American writing was...Then, I have gradually realized that it is important to make ELL writers see the value of their language background and diversity rather than simply making it sound more American-like. Because their so-called different perspectives and ways of thinking are their unique asset that

could make their writings much more interesting” (Interview with Mina)

All the participants emphasize that instructors and school administrators need to equip themselves with strong awareness that ELL writers bring valuable linguistic and cultural diversities in their writings and writing practices. Rather than forcing them to quickly adopt ‘dominant’ writing rules and convention, participants highlight the need for giving enough space and time for ELL writers to negotiate different writing styles and discourse and develop their own identities as writers so that they do not see their linguistic and cultural diversity as a source of problems. Here are some strategies suggested by participants: (a) *Share writing consultants’ or instructors’ own experiences as novice writers* (e.g., ‘I sometimes share my experience with my writers. In my freshman year, I felt overwhelmed with all the expectations about academic writing, reflection papers, mini-research proposals and so on. I am a so-called native speaker but I didn’t know how to deal with academic papers, and I am sure ELL students who just enter the new academic environment would feel the same way. When I share my experience with ELL writers, I feel like they are more relaxed and more comfortable to discuss their own writing-related issues with me’, (b) *Share writing consultants’ or instructors’ own experiences as second language writers’* (e.g., I took intensive Spanish courses years ago and I know what it feels like not being able to effectively communicate in a foreign language setting. I am a decent writer, but I was not doing well in Spanish composition. If my writers feel intense, I share my own story as a foreign language learner, saying ‘hey you are not alone.’), and (c) *try to learn about and incorporate ELL writers’ backgrounds* (e.g., ‘I would prefer to ask my writers to explain about their writing approach, writing styles and organization, and then go back to the given prompt to discuss what can be negotiated’).

### **C. Helping ELL Writers Become More Autonomous Writers**

The most distinct nature of writing centers is to provide one-to-one consulting sessions where writers can improve and better their writings in collaboration with writing consultants. Even though the concept of collaboration is ideal, participants state that it is not easy to make the writing consulting session fully

collaborative and co-constructed. According to participants, many ELL writers come to the session with a passive mindset and relatively low motivation, which then leads ELL writers be less autonomous in their writings. Participants comment that many ELL writers, especially those who have experienced of being marginalized as a troubled non-native writer, are expected their papers to be 'fixed' and 'cleaned' rather than exercising their agency or putting their voices in their writings.

As many studies have demonstrated, the directive session with immediate correction or proofreading may help ELL writers receive a better grade but cannot help them eventually become a successful writer (e.g., Ekholm et al., 2013; Peterson & McClay, 2010; Sérór, 2011; Tardy, 2005, 2006; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2012). Similarly, all the participants stress the importance of having an interactive and collaborative approach when teaching and consulting ELL writers. They believe that the interactive and collaborative approach enables ELL writers to get needed supports and guidance but at the same time take responsibility for their own writing. David, an experienced writing consultant who used to work as a private tutor and editor for ELL writers before joining the writing center, however, points out that a collaborative writing consulting session requires to build up mutual expectation between student writers and writing consultants about the session, unlike a private tutoring session where more directedness is expected and allowed. Not only David, but also other writing consultants state that they have experienced a certain level of resistance coming from ELL writers when they first explain the interactive and collaborative approach. They, however, claim that it would be equally wrong to impose a certain agenda of "we as a writing consultant and instructor believe that working on macro-level issues over micro-level issues would be better for you".

In order to resolve this dilemma, David prefers to explain the goal of academic writing consulting sessions or writing classes to ELL writers and set up the mutual goal based on ELL writers' needs. He believes that it is essential to help ELL writers see potential benefits of having a collaborative session through explanation and discussion. Jane, an experienced writing consultant and writing instructor, also articulates the needs of building a mutual goal of the writing consulting session or class with ELL writers so that they would have

same understanding and expectation about the writing instruction, and they would not feel lost or their needs were ignored. Here are some strategies experienced writing consultants present: (a) *be explicit about the goal of the session or class and the potential benefits of having a collaborative session* (e.g., “our goal is to improve your writing ability in English and help you identify patterns of errors and organization issues so that when you write or review paper in future, you can be mindful and notice these issues”), (b) *listen to their needs and incorporate their needs into the session* (e.g., “if ELL writers are truly concerned about their grammars, I would say that I would like to go over the macro issues first and then we would work on some micro issues. So that they would not feel their needs would not be taken care of”) and (c) *discuss their general writing concerns* so that they would realize the needs of improving their writing skills rather than simply getting micro writing issues fixed.

### **Pedagogical Implications And Conclusion**

As Canagrajah (2002, 2004) and other scholars argue, it is important to encourage ELL writers to develop their multiple voices and identities as writers in an English-speaking academic community. Linguistic and cultural diversities they bring to their writings and writing practices not only help them become successful writers with multiple perspectives and diverse writing styles but also enrich an English-speaking academic setting. It is, however, unfortunate that many ELL writers perceive their different writing styles and structures as a problem in need of fixing and feel the urgent needs of quickly adopting the dominant way of thinking and writing.

Findings suggest three pedagogical implications concerning ELL writer’s sustainable development and process. First, it is important to provide ELL writers sufficient opportunities and experiences where they can be more confident in their writing and voices. As findings highlight, it is crucial to help ELL writers get rid of the imposed or self-imposed label of ‘a troubled writer’ and become more confident in their writing. Second, it is crucial to encourage ELL writers to see themselves as a multilingual and multicompetent writer whose diversities could bring new perspectives, writing styles and hybrid forms of writing. As participants of this study point out, it is important for instructors

and school administrators to see the value of ELL linguistic and cultural diversities in their writings and writing practices. Third, it is necessary to help ELL writers become more autonomous writers and empower themselves to be more agentive. Li (1999) who narrates about her own struggle as a non-native English writer argues that her non-nativeness in English gives her unique insights, and her realization of the need to embrace her diverse voice provides her “the license to march to a different drum” (p. 50). That is, it is important for ELL writers to see their diverse backgrounds as an asset, not a source of interference, in order to become a successful writer who could bring about their creativity into their writings and make unique contribution to an English-speaking academic community.

This paper also highlights the important role of language instructors and writing consultant to help ELL writers develop their voices and identities as multilingual writers and achieve sustainable development in language learning. Specific pedagogical strategies suggested in this paper would be particularly useful to school administrators, instructors, and writing consultants who are encountering more and more ELL students in their classrooms.

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## **ANGLŲ KALBOS BESIMOKANČIŲ RAŠYTOJŲ PARENGIMAS TAPTI DAUGIAKALBIAIS RAŠYTOJAIS: IŠŠŪKIAI IR STRATEGIJOS**

**Santrauka.** Dėl didėjančio studentų užsieniečių skaičiaus anglakalbių šalių aukštojo mokslo įstaigose padidėjo poreikis gerinti jų akademinį rašymą. Tačiau neretai kyla prielaida, kad anglų kalbos besimokantys (angl. *English language learner*, ELL) studentai turi kuo greičiau priimti vyraujančio akademinio rašymo tradicijas, kad įsitvirtintų anglakalbėje akademinėje bendruomenėje. Ir nors vis daugiau dėmesio skiriama anglų kalba besimokančiųjų rašymo stiliui lavinti bei jų įvairialypei tapatybei, per mažai atlikta tyrimų ir surengta diskusijų apie tai, kaip kalbos specialistai galėtų paskatinti anglų kalbos besimokančius rašytojus sukurti savo stilių ir tapti daugiakalbiais bei daugiakultūriais rašytojais. Šiame darbe analizuojami dešimties patyrusių rašymo konsultantų bei dėstytojų kokybiniai interviu ir tiriami didžiausi iššūkiai, kuriuos patiria anglų kalbos besimokantys rašytojai, aptariamos skirtingos strategijos, kurias pasitelkę studentai galėtų veiksmingai tobulinti savo akademinio rašymo stilių, vartodami anglų kaip mokymo kalbą. Rezultatai parodė, kad daugelis koledžų ir universitetų anglakalbėse šalyse vis dar vadovaujasi vientisu vaizdu ir anglų kalbos besimokančius rašytojus vadina „lį bėdą patekusiais nevietiniais rašytojais“, nors labai svarbu, kad rašymo konsultantai ir dėstytojai pripažintų anglų kalbos besimokančių rašytojų daugiakalbę kilmę ir padėtų jiems sukurti savo unikalų stilių, tobulėti bei siekti progreso.

**Pagrindinės sąvokos:** anglų kalbos studentai; darnioji daugiakalbystė; daugiakalbiai rašytojai; rašymas antrąja kalba; rašytojų agentūra.