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Writing with an English as a Second Language (ESL) Student

SARA MULCAHY

This paper explores the pedagogies and practices of teaching writing to English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students. With growing numbers of ESL students entering colleges and universities, it is important to be aware of the challenges facing ESL students. Equally important is awareness of what methodologies and practices work best when assisting ESL students with their writing. This paper serves as a final report for a service learning project that consisted of one-on-one workshops with a Japanese ESL student. This final report draws on various secondary sources and primary research in order to explore the writing development of this particular ESL student. It reports on the background of the student with a profile that explores her educational and cultural background; a history of the student as a writer of English and a description of the student’s writing characteristics; a close reading of a writing sample from the student; analysis of the writing assignments given to the student; and lastly, a reflection on the service learning project and how it has affected my knowledge of ESL writing instruction. All of this research was done for a 300-level English course: “Topics in Writing: Teaching Writing to ESL Students.”

Methodologies
Methods of research for this paper included analysis of numerous scholarly articles on ESL writing and writing instruction; interviews with the student in order to become acquainted with her life in America and her habits as a writer; and an interview with one of the student’s professors in order to understand her approach to ESL writing instruction. I also took notes on online research into Japanese culture and the three writing conferences I conducted with the student. Our writing conferences consisted of the student bringing copies of the writing assignment she was currently developing (I also had copies of assignments) and my helping her with the drafting and writing process. Lastly I had four writing samples from the student I was working with as my data.

Student Profile
Mai Suzuki (pseudonym), an exchange student from Japan, is the student I worked with for the service learning project. Mai is a very engaging young woman who was eager to participate in this project. On the first day we met, I conducted an interview with her, and I learned a lot about her life in Japan and here at Bridgewater State University (BSU). As the semester progressed, I continued to learn more about Mai.
Educational Background
Mai is spending her sophomore year of college at BSU. Her home university is Kansai University (KU), in Osaka, which is also four-year institution. At both BSU and KU, her major is anthropology. The high school she attended was Osaka Jogakuin. She found high school to be harder than college because she was required to study very hard for numerous tests in order to get into college. KU has a rather large exchange program with many partner institutions, including BSU, and encourages students of the university to study abroad (“Partner Universities”). Mai chose to attend BSU because she knew other Japanese students who had spent a year here, and they all had good experiences.

Mai is finding her time in America to be pleasurable too. Before this year, Mai had never been to America, nor had anyone in her family, but they all encouraged her to come here. Though it was intimidating to come to America by herself, Mai adjusted well to this new life. At the time of the project, she lived off campus. She had lived on campus first semester but did not like it because she found she did not like having a roommate. Mai is enjoying her educational experiences at Bridgewater. She finds the academic content of BSU and KU are rather similar, but she thinks school is harder for her here than it is in Japan because everything here is in English. While the content of both universities is similar, Mai finds that the overall school experience here is very different from Japan. In Japan, many of her classes were lecture based. Here, she finds many classes are participation based and the classrooms have a more relaxed atmosphere. She also finds that students and professors have a more intimate relationship than they do in Japan. Mai likes the closeness American professors have with their students.

Linguistic Background
Helping Mai with the transition into American life is her experience with the English language. No one in her family speaks English, but she had eight years of English language education in Japan. Luckily, she has found that people are very helpful and accommodating as she is learning to improve her written English. Because she is an international student from Japan, some general assumptions can be made about Mai’s English abilities based on prior research. To be accepted into Bridgewater State University, a foreign exchange student must have a TOEFL score of at least 550. Though Mai studied English before coming to America, according to Joy Reid (1998), she may not have known the “rhetorical principles of academic writing” while studying English in Japan. Many international students are taught relatively simplistic qualities of writing in English (e.g. writing topic sentences) in their home countries but do not move on to more advanced writing tasks (Reid, 1998). Many international students are not eligible for federal assistance when it comes to learning the English language; however, BSU provides assistance to ESL students, and Mai has a composition partner that helps her with writing.

Cultural Background
Students like Mai who are studying abroad are becoming a smaller minority in Japan. A recent article in The New York Times explores the declining trend of Japanese abroad students. The Japanese government and schools such as Kansai University have traditionally encouraged students to study abroad. They find that studying abroad is an ideal experience to have on a resumé and many employers in Japan seek out students with abroad experiences. Unfortunately, there has been a sharp decline in the number of Japanese study abroad students; in 2008, the number decreased by 11%, and there has been a steady decline in international students each years since then. Many people believe the reason that students no longer have strong ambitions to study abroad is the increasing difficulty of being accepted into Japanese universities (Tanikawa). Mai is definitely an exception to the declining interest in international studies. Not only has Mai studied in America, but when she was in high school, she participated in numerous international programs. Before coming to America, Mai had previously studied in South Korea, New Zealand, and Canada, with Canada being her favorite trip. I found it interesting that Canada was her favorite. Perhaps my own proximity to Canada makes it seem the least exciting of these three places, whereas, for Mai, South Korea and New Zealand seem easily accessible. From the information I have acquired from Mai, it seems that Mai holds international study in the highest esteem.

Mai is fully taking advantage of what the school and America have to offer. Upon first coming to BSU, she was a little intimidated and felt lonely at times, but she quickly made friends with other international students. Though she still misses her family and friends in Japan, the friendships she has formed since coming to America have made this an enjoyable experience for Mai. She was excited to meet Noam Chomsky when the Social Justice League, a student organization, brought him to BSU, and she has traveled quite frequently since arriving at Bridgewater. She enjoys taking the train into Boston. Over winter break, she spent three weeks in Florida and to her excitement, went to Disney World. Mai will be going back to Florida at the end of the semester before she returns to Japan. She has certainly immersed herself in the American culture, and she admitted that she will miss America when she returns home to Japan.
Student as a Writer

History as a Writer

When I first met Mai, she was not overly confident in her writing abilities in either Japanese or English. She does not enjoy writing in her native language nor in English, claiming she has never been a strong writer. Mai told me she does not like grammar and she wishes to expand her vocabulary; however, she is satisfied with the progress she has made. Mai told me she tries to use English whenever she can. She only talks and writes in Japanese when she is trying to communicate with her family and friends in Japan. She does not want to lose the language she has acquired.

Mai does not write very much for pleasure. Most of the writing she does outside of school involves email, Facebook, text messages, and Mixi (which is the Japanese version of Facebook). Though email, Facebook, and Mixi are not forms of academic writing, social networking has become an integral tool in helping ESL students create their own identity both in America and in their native country. In their article, “Social Networking in a Second Language: Engaging Multiple Literate Practices through Identity Composition,” Kevin Eric DePew and Susan Miller-Cochran (2010) examined the effects various social networking outlets have on ESL identity and ESL writing abilities. They found that the writing done on social networking sites would not qualify as typical academic writing. Their participants even admitted that the writing done on these sites has no influence on their academic writing; however, the researchers believe that social networking can inform a variety of social contexts so it is a practice that should be encouraged (DePew & Miller-Cochran, 2010).

I believe that social networking is a great way for students to practice writing in English. Rarely do people comment on grammar and structure on Facebook. This creates a stress-free environment for ESL students to practice their writing. Mai herself does a lot of writing on her Facebook page. It is a great tool for her to communicate with her friends in America and her family and friends back in Japan. She constantly posts status updates, and she uses Facebook as an outlet to spread the word about the relief efforts for Japan. She writes in standard English conventions and, like the students from DePew and Miller-Cochran’s (2010) study, she writes in both her home language and in English. It seems that in Mai’s case, social networking is an excellent outlet to practice her English skills.

Writing over the Semester

During my first writing conference with Mai, I was very impressed with her writing ability. After emailing with her, I had the impression that her English skills were more than adequate, but I was still surprised with the quality of her writing. There were little to no global errors, and Mai seemed to have a terrific grasp on writing the English language. One of her biggest concerns with her writing was that it is too simple. Mai is not accustomed to writing in the straightforward manner that Americans so frequently use, but as the semester progressed, she became more comfortable with this style of writing. The only instance in which Mai seemed to regress was during our last writing conference. There were numerous grammatical errors, and this surprised me because I was not used to seeing this in her writing. At this writing conference, Mai told me she was feeling a little overwhelmed because she had four papers, in addition to the one she showed me, that needed to be completed by the end of the semester. I think her grammatical errors were more a result of the stress than lack of grammar knowledge.

Attitudes and Habits as a Writer

While working with Mai, I noticed she had a unique way of writing. She had a creative style, but at the same time, she wrote with a lot of clarity. These two styles might seem to be at odds with each other, but Mai made it work. In all of her papers she included poetic lines or creative interpretations of the writing prompt. In our second writing conference, the writing prompt required her to write about her cultural identity. The prompt was rather dry, and it would have been easy for Mai to write a boring paper, but she provided a unique response to the prompt. Rather than answering the prompt directly, Mai discussed how it was hard for her to form her identity and how it has been influenced by America and Japan. This was an interesting and effective take on the assignment. My favorite piece of writing from Mai came during our last writing conference. Mai’s strength in this paper was her description of the music she heard. One of her sentences described the piano music as sounding “like petals were falling down brilliantly.” I thought that was an amazing sentence and it demonstrated that Mai is more than a competent writer of English. I believe that Mai’s skills can be attributed to the significant number of English courses she took before coming to America.

With each writing conference, Mai found some way to surprise me. It definitely felt like a different experience each time I met with her. Everything from the content of the paper to the questions Mai asked was different in each conference. Most of the time, the questions Mai asked had little to do with her paper and more to do with written English more broadly. The first of these surprising questions came during our first writing conference. Mai started asking me about MLA formatting, citing direct quotations, and making a Works Cited page. The questions she was asking certainly did not affect this particular paper much, but she was eager to learn about MLA. This resulted in a mini MLA lesson in which I explained various
Close Reading of a Writing Sample
While working with Mai last semester, I saw four different writing samples. The paper I will focus on here was for her Intercultural Communications class. The writing prompt was not very detailed; it stated, “Write a paper of 750 words or more in which you describe how culture/s have contributed to the formation of your identity.” The students were supposed to utilize their course knowledge in order to discuss their own cultural identity. The assignment had many suggestions for the students and many questions to guide the students’ thoughts.

Holistic Reading
Upon reading the directions for the assignment, I was a little troubled because it was very vague and I was unsure if Mai would have trouble answering the prompt. As guided by the assignment, the main point of Mai’s paper was how various cultures have affected her identity, but she took the idea a step further and said the concept of individual identity is a cultural idea in and of itself. Being in America had helped her think about her own individual identity, which was something she had never considered before the assignment. In order to articulate her struggle with the idea of individual identity, she began her paper by discussing the struggle she had being identified as an Asian in America. To Mai, “Asian” is a broad term that does not accurately describe her, because she is Japanese. In her next paragraph, Mai introduced the concept of identity and wrote that the Japanese language does not have a word for “identity.” I found this to be an excellent subject for the paragraph. It created an interesting contrast with what the assignment was asking of her, and yet she still fulfilled the requirements of the assignment. In the concluding paragraph, she discussed the idea of identity once again. In this paragraph, she seemed more sure of herself in her identity. She said that in Japan, she never had to think about her cultural identity because everyone was of the same culture, and in Japan, the focus is on the community rather than the individual. But after doing this assignment and being in America for almost a year, Mai came to believe that the idea of identity is important because people are different and we must celebrate these differences. I thought it was a beautiful way to end her essay. The structure Mai chose for the assignment was very interesting. She made the assignment into a narrative that told a story about her coming to America. I certainly learned a lot about Mai simply through reading this assignment.

Interpretive Reading
A good portion of Mai’s paper was devoted to comparing Japanese and American cultures and their views on identity. There were many explicit references to her life in Japan and what it was like for her coming to America. I thought this paper was also interesting because I got a sense that Mai strongly identified herself with other exchange students. Throughout her paper, Mai emphasized that though culture has affected her identity, it is people who have had the biggest effect on who she has become. It was especially moving to read about how she and other exchange students were able to cope with their loneliness by sharing their feelings with each other. When discussing what her fellow exchange students have given her, Mai wrote, “people who provided me those things [friendship and experiences] would be as precious as my home which created a foundation of my identity since we have shared our feelings.” This really gives the audience a sense of how strongly Mai indentifies herself as an exchange student.

Writing Support and the Writing Assignments
Writing Support
Overall, I was disappointed by the lack of support offered to Mai’s writing development throughout the semester. When I first interviewed Mai, she told me she had a composition partner who would help her with her work; however, she did not say much about the in-class support that was provided to her. During my three conferences with Mai, I asked her what kind of writing support was available to her in class, and it seemed that there was hardly any offered. I observed writing from three different classes, and not one of the assignments included a section about the drafting process. The first writing assignment was for her English as a Second Language II class. For this assignment, Mai was to conduct an interview with a
faculty member from BSU, and Mai did not have an assignment sheet. She only received an email about the assignment. When I asked her about peer revision in the classroom, she seemed confused and made it seem as though there was no drafting process in the classroom. When I met with Mai for a writing conference on this assignment, she said the paper was due the day before but the teacher pushed the deadline back a day so the students could have more time to work on it.

Later in the semester, Mai emailed me to ask for help on another paper from this class. We did not have a writing conference because she emailed me over the weekend and the paper was due early in the week. She simply wanted feedback via email. I had encouraged Mai to email me whenever she needed help on a paper and this was the first and only time she did so. Because she emailed me so urgently, I assumed this was another instance in which the drafting and revision process was not very thorough in the class, but I cannot be sure.

When I interviewed a professor for this study, I chose to interview Mai’s English as a Second Language professor in order to get her perspective on ESL writing support in the classroom. The notes from my interview were at odds with what Mai had told me about the class. The professor told me she always encourages peer revision and drafting in the classroom.

The other courses that assigned writing apparently did not provide class time for peer revision and drafting either. One of the assignments was for a Communications class and it had a checklist of things the students were encouraged to do. Some of these suggestions included peer revision but the professor did not make time for peer revision in the classroom. While this was not an ESL class, there were quite a few international students in it. With this in mind, I thought some accommodations may be made for these ESL students, but it did not appear that this was happening. During our last writing conference, Mai provided me with a writing sample from her Music class. This was another example in which peer review and drafting was not made available for the students. I found this to be peculiar because the students had to write reviews of music productions. I doubt many of the students have written reviews of music productions before. I thought a drafting process in which the class finds samples of music reviews and discusses what should be included in them would be more helpful to the students than just writing one and passing it in. I was happy to hear from Mai that her professor understood that she was an ESL student, so she was not too harsh when correcting her grammar. While I liked the variety of writing I saw from Mai, and the central idea of each assignment, they all needed more detail, and the classes needed to provide more writing support.

Assignment Design
In addition to the lack of support offered to the student, the overall design of the writing assignments could be made more effective for ESL students. In order to improve these assignments, I would use the suggestions provided by Joy Reid and Barbara Kroll (1995) in “Designing and Assessing Effective Classroom Writing Assignments for NES and ESL Students.” Reid and Kroll believe that writing assignments should be contextualized and authentic (closely related to classroom work). The assignments should also have accessible content that allows students to utilize information learned in the course, should interest the writer as well as the reader, and should be developed with criteria that reflect the goals of the course. In terms of most of these guidelines, Mai’s assignments for her Communications and Music class were sound because they related to course material and created writer interest. They could have been clarified in terms of the how they will be evaluated, though. Neither assignment specified the evaluation criteria for how the student would be graded. Even for a Native English Speaking student this would cause confusion. While both assignments were well formulated in terms of context and content, they were lacking rhetorical specifications. There were not clear directions about the structure of the paper, and the assignments did not provide the students with a specific audience.

Culture in Writing Assignments
While I did not think the best support was offered to Mai, I did find many of her writing assignments to be culturally inclusive, especially within her English as a Second Language II class. None of her assignments seemed to be geared to just American students. Her first assignment was to interview a faculty member from the school. They were encouraged to interview someone who held a position that interested them. Mai chose to interview the director of BSU’s Center for International Engagement. This allowed for Mai to fulfill the assignment while researching an area of the university that was related to her and interested her. Another culturally inclusive assignment from this class was her midterm assignment, which required Mai to write about and research one of her favorite things. She chose to write about calligraphy, which she originally started learning about in Japan. This is a great assignment for ESL students because it does not require them to write about their culture, which some students may not feel comfortable with. Asking students to write about their favorite thing could very well be related to their culture or it could be related to something they developed an interest in after coming to America. Mai’s assignment from her Music course seemed to be culturally inclusive too. Music is universal and this assignment required students to see concerts they would not normally attend. In fact, students were particularly encouraged...
to see world music. This assignment gave Mai the opportunity to see a concert supporting relief efforts in Japan, so it allowed Mai to have her own personal cultural connection to what she was writing about.

These assignments allowed Mai to utilize narrative in her writing, but their overall format was not completely in the narrative genre. There is some debate as to whether the use of the narrative genre is appropriate for ESL instruction. Linda Harklau (2000), in her article “From the ‘Good Kids’ to the ‘Worst’: Representations of English Language across Educational Settings,” weighed some of the pros and cons of assigning narratives to students. Harklau finds that narratives can be positive for ESL students because they “provide links between school and personal experience,” helping students take pride in their status as immigrants (or, in Mai’s case, as exchange students); however, Harklau also found that students were often assigned the same narratives over and over again. This allows students to write about the same topic and not grow as writers. I find the assignments Mai received allowed her to write about new topics while still maintaining some of the positive cultural connections narratives frequently generate.

Final Reflection
I enjoyed working on the service learning project for “Teaching Writing to ESL Students” and benefited tremendously from the outcome, though I certainly approached the assignment apprehensively at first. I had never worked on a service learning project before nor had I ever worked with an ESL student. I feared that I would give improper advice and permanently corrupt the English skills of the student I was working with. Though I plan on becoming an English teacher, I had not spent much time practicing what I have learned. Education classes are theoretical, and while I have many exciting ideas for when I become a teacher, I have yet to utilize any of these ideas. So not only had I never worked with an ESL student before, but I had never worked with any student before! This project provided me with an excellent opportunity to do something that actually involved the teaching of English, and I am very happy to have had that opportunity.

Though I approached the assignment with apprehension, working with Mai was not as frightening as I originally believed. I was afraid she would come to me with questions I could not answer, or she would barely be able to speak or write in English and I would not be able to provide her with the assistance she needed. As it turned out, Mai had very good English skills and was not looking for me to perfect her English, so I felt far less pressure after meeting her for the first time. Overall, our conferences were very casual. We spent the majority of our time talking; even when our conversations were not directly related to her writing, they were able to help her improve her paper. Before this experience, I always thought writing conferences would be more formal and all about the writing directly, specifically focused on what was wrong and/or good about an essay; however, Mai and I were simply talking, and that proved to be most beneficial. Before this, I had never thought that teaching could be so casual or so simple yet still so effective. Putting writing conferences in a casual context makes it less intimidating for both the student and the teacher.

Overall, I am very pleased with how this service-learning project turned out. I tremendously enjoyed working with Mai and reading all the articles on second language writing. My interest in working with second-language students has certainly grown through this work, and I would like to continue working with second language students in the future as a teacher.

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