

Speaking Their Language: Working with ESL Writers as a Multilingual Consultant

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Writing Centers bring together people of many different ages, cultures, backgrounds, and levels of proficiency in English. Each writer is unique and requires specific techniques to get the most out of a session. While different types of writers may present their own challenges, English as a Second Language (ESL) writers tend to evoke the most controversy regarding ways to "deal" with them during a consultation. As writing consultants and native speakers of English, we tend to place ourselves in a group far removed from "them," these foreigners, thinking of ESL writers with frustration, sympathy, perhaps even pity.

The truth is that ESL students do not want pity. I should know. In a way, I am an ESL student myself--an *Español Segunda Lengua* writer. My major requires that I write college level research papers and literary essays on a regular basis in Spanish, a language other than my own native tongue. ESL writers are my favorites because I can identify with them; I share and understand their struggle. The lack of a "native ear" can be difficult when self-editing; for this reason, although I am comfortable writing in Spanish, English will always be my home. Aside from using this common bond as a way to establish a rapport with the student, there are many benefits to being a consultant with a high level of fluency in foreign languages when working with ESL writers.

Whenever I work with Spanish or Portuguese ESL students, I feel like I have a much fuller understanding of how to help them with sentence level problems and grammatical errors when they become global issues. Instead of simply blurting out, "this sounds funny" or scribbling down the dreaded, ever-ambiguous "awkward wording" comment, it helps to connect with concrete explanations to concepts that might get lost in translation.

A girl I consulted, who told me her native language was Spanish when she first sat down, was having trouble understanding demonstrative pronouns. She was very confused as to when she should use which pronoun and mixed them up almost every time she used one in her paper. I tried explaining to her in English, using English examples, but it just wouldn't stick. Finally, I decided to try something else. She had written "this countries are" and I asked her how she would say it in Spanish. She replied, "*estos países son...*" and as the words came out of her mouth, she realized all by herself that it should be "these" instead of "this" because *estos* translates to "these." She also had trouble with sentences beginning with phrases like "This is." I told her to think of *esto*, *eso*, and *aquello*. Whenever she would use *esto*, it should be "this," *eso* or *aquello*, it should be "that." Something that was taking forever to get across suddenly took no time at all because we incorporated her first language into the explanation, linking a seemingly foreign concept to something she felt at home with.

I had a similar consultation with a young man who couldn't get the difference between "who's" and "whose." I explained it in English: think of "who's" as who is, "whose" as belonging to someone. After a few minutes of working through examples, he reluctantly admitted he still wasn't completely confident he would remember the difference later. I told him, "You know what would make this much easier?" Then I simply drew a little arrow to *quien es* from "who's"

and to *cuyo* from “whose.” Although they sound very similar in English, they are very different in Spanish. I told him if he thought about whether he meant *cuyo* or *quien es* in Spanish, it would help him remember which “who’s” or “whose” belonged in his English sentence. He smiled. He understood.

Aside from global grammatical errors like these that fix easily because of a 1:1 correspondence, being familiar with the ESL student's first language helps in other ways, too. If focus, structure, or explanation is a concern, sometimes students might find it easier to talk about their writing in their native language first and then bring it back to English if the topic is particularly daunting and difficult to explain. From personal experience, it helps me to talk with my classmates in English before class starts about the readings in Latin American Literature. Knowing and understanding foreign languages makes this a possibility in the Writing Center.

However, some consultants might argue that it is better to have no knowledge of the ESL writer's native language so there won't be such a heavy reliance on it. English-only communication forces students to stay in their English mindset and strengthen their skills. Going in and out of the second language may be counter-productive and hinder the writer's mastery of English. When working with ESL students whose first language I am not familiar with, such as Chinese or Korean, I have seen how it builds their language skills in the second language when the native language is not an option. These students must try their best to form coherent, clear ideas and explanations during the consultation in English and in effect, it forces them to be better. Unlike the classroom, the Writing Center can be a safe, casual, non-judgmental environment to practice these language skills and talk about writing in a more academic arena than at home with friends and family. Incorporating the second language into consultations might eliminate this valuable outlet for English exposure and practice.

Another problem might arise if multilingual consultants gloss over things that monolingual English speakers would not understand. For example, I consulted a young lady who wrote a cultural paper about her homeland, Brazil. She used Portuguese words and phrases in italics to describe various religious concepts; I understood them because I know Brazilian Portuguese language and culture, but would a monolingual English speaker just as easily understand what is meant by "*Umbanda*" or "*Nossa Senhora*"? In cases like this, the consultant helps the writer more by having no knowledge of her native tongue to catch instances like this where she should elaborate more, give clearer examples, and help her English readers understand what she is trying to convey.

Despite these problems, I believe as writing consultants, knowing foreign languages can enrich our consultations with ESL writers. Handled carefully as an occasional tool, foreign language proficiency can help us to establish rapport, explain difficult concepts, provide comparative grammatical examples, and act as a sounding board in a way that makes the writer most comfortable. Making sure we keep the complications of foreign language incorporation in mind, writing consultants can strive towards better consultations with ESL writers by showing them we know how to speak their language in more ways than one.