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## Teaching ESL Writing in Higher Education

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### Abstract

This study investigates teaching ESL (English as a Second Language) writing in higher education and outlines instructional techniques required to facilitate ESL students' writing proficiency. Since college and university students are primarily assessed according to their writing ability and academic conventions, teaching ELLs (English Language Learners) necessitates understanding not only teaching strategies but also students' backgrounds and perceptions on learning. Through comparison of various academic literature on pedagogical methodology, the paper analyses key areas and provides recommendations to instructional approaches on adult ESL classroom concepts. The conclusions showed that when learners identify with their needs, they can improve writing within an empowered and harmonized environment. The study draws on the importance of creating appropriate strategies for motivation to facilitate ESL writing.

**Keywords:** teaching academic writing; writer identity; integration; peer review

### 1. Introduction

Academic writing and cultural differences are significant factors to consider when addressing the needs of ESL students. When instructors nurture students to develop writing skills, they help to eliminate cultural differences. Thus, teaching ESL students on matters pertaining to academic writing may be very challenging because of cultural and linguistic barriers [1].

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Both students and instructors may lack morale when they fail to achieve the desired outcomes. The steps to success begin with the commitment of the instructor in identifying, monitoring, and addressing students' needs. As postulated by Finn [2], instructors need to break these barriers and boost students' interactions in the classroom. Instructors and students that learn to respect each other's culture can build on academic milestones to move beyond the cultural challenges [3].

Subsequently, students should understand the importance of reading and writing in academics. Students need to develop fluent writing by taking advantage of their instructors' expertise and knowledge. When instructors impart their expertise and correct prevalent mistakes exhibited in their students' work, students can identify academic writing norms [4]. The students begin with significant challenges, but the instructors' empowerment enables them to build confidence in their writing endeavors. Consequently, the classroom becomes a haven for all students despite the fact that they are limited in their understanding of American culture and language ability. As Gay [5] pointed out, the role of the instructor is to ensure that students find comfort in the classroom and feel free to share their experiences without fear of humiliation. Therefore, lesson plans should reflect the needs of each student so that strugglers obtain instructors' attention when the need arises. Instructors need to allocate time in the lesson plan according to students' abilities. Stereotyping triggers serious problems in the classroom because it thwarts ESL students' confidence [6]. Consequently, students fail in their activities because of demoralization rather than inability to learn. Thus, instructors need to focus on pedagogical strategies that reflect the capabilities and challenges of ESL students, such as elimination of stereotypes, feedback, peer review, instructional approaches, and technologies.

## **2. Literature review**

### ***2.1. Stereotyping and writer identity***

Spack [7] argued, one of the greatest setbacks ESL students experience emanates from stereotyping in the classroom. Stereotyping deters students from discovering their abilities as writers because of a negative learning environment. Quantitative research analysis carried out by Okagaki, Helling, and Bingham [8] highlighted that identity perceptions tend to alter students' notions of academia. Their research on 171 American students suggested that stereotyping threatens not only students' identity, but also performance. Instructors and other English Native Language (ENL) learners tend to misinterpret the capabilities of ESL students. Many instructors believe that ESL students are incapable of good academic writing based on their culture, gender and linguistic background [6,9]. Thus, only ESL students with greater confidence are able to perform well in such classrooms. These ESL students tend to ask a myriad of questions, and they remain focused on their goals despite the prevalent stereotypes [10]. Some instructors lack the ability to recognize the efforts of ESL students in classroom activities. When ESL students fail to achieve the expected levels of performance, instructors have a tendency to focus on the ENL students because they are less challenging to teach. Consequently, these stereotypes create huge impediments in academic progress for ESL students. Despite the potential to perform beyond their cultural and linguistic barriers, students feel hopeless in such negative environments. Fernsten [6] highlighted that stereotypes are dangerous labels that demoralize students from reaching their potential in the classroom. Nonetheless, identity is dynamic, and ESL students are capable of transforming depending on the

guidance from instructors. Thus, a common good environment rests on the instructors' skill in identifying learners' differences and needs [11]. When instructors take time to conduct microanalyses on their students, they can discover conflicts and desires [6]. Such knowledge is important because it enables instructors to prepare assignments according to individual capacities to make academic content understandable [12].

### ***2.2. Teacher's feedback***

Instructors' comments towards ESL students may culminate into different outcomes depending on students' perceptions and ideas of the academic writing process [4]. Feedback is indispensable for students' as they view it as a necessary and encouraging process, so instructors' awareness and impact on students learning is critical [13], [14]. Some comments may motivate students to conduct substantive revisions while others may amount to zero changes. Thus, students improve their writing the most when instructors learn to implement positive feedback, such as imperatives, statement of problems, questions of doubt, and hedging comments, but they should evaluate the weight of their comments against the students' performances [15]. The effectiveness of students' revisions depends on how they perceive instructors' comments that may culminate into either ineffective or effective revisions. For example, vague comments in the form of questions lead to student confusion whereas imperative feedback provides better accuracy [16]. Therefore, linguistic accuracy remains an important element in assessing quality of academic writing, but on the other hand fluency in writing before correction is essential for students to express their ideas [17]. However, instructors face a dilemma in understanding the right linguistic form such as meaningful words or phrases needed to improve ESL students' writing ability [16]. Instructors often ignore the views of the ESL students based on the notion that students do not understand their own academic needs. The urgency for sample analyses provides a platform for instructors to identify effective writing skills of ESL students. Thus, instructors need to study the characteristics of each student and develop feedback strategies depending on students' challenges and capabilities [18].

### ***2.3. Peer review***

ESL students are often confused because grammatical differences between English and their native languages. These differences and the difficulty of mastering academic writing create a wide range of grappling issues, such as proficiency and cultural barriers [19]. Peer review represents an important pedagogical strategy to improve the academic writing skills of ESL students. Peer reviewers are able to understand each other because of their constant interactions. Moreover, learners gain confidence from the feedback provided by their peers because of cultural and language homogeneity [20]. Students want their teachers to nurture them based on their knowledge and expertise but tend to appreciate peer feedback. Thus, students are able to conduct successful revisions after detailed discussions with their peers. According Caulk [21], 89% of his intermediate ESL students suggested useful comments, and 60% gave their recommendations without any instruction from himself. Further research carried out by Mendonca and Johnson [22], revealed that 53% of amendments were as a result of peer comments. Consequently, students are likely to improve significantly in areas such as rhetorical writing, because instructors' feedback tends to be fairly general as opposed to students' more specific feedback responses [21].

#### **2.4. Instructional methods**

ESL students usually have difficulties in understanding the writing process, avoiding vague phrases, and revising their own writing. Instructors have the mandate to understand that these difficulties form part of the learning process and apply to both native and non-native English speakers [23]. The instructors' awareness of students' cognitive abilities help create a platform for teaching. For example, ESL students in Saudi Arabia confirmed the importance of mental and cognitive development to reinforce their academic voice [24]. In addition, development of intellect through graphical devices such as video displays achieve a scaffolding effect to help students visualize concept mapping (CM) [25], which is somewhat like an interactive and perceptive view of knowledge. When instructors provide this inclusive (CM) learning environment to enable an equal platform for non-native English learners, higher cognitive functions connect to create greater levels of understanding [26]. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia indicates that students have a higher interest in developing their professional English writing skills as a result of an informed understanding by instructors [24]. Such competencies provide assurance at the university level and a pedestal for global competitiveness relative to professional qualifications.

Moreover, when instructors complete class sessions and analyze the difficulties encountered by ELLs, they enable students to develop writing skills and retention abilities. In addition, instructors emphasize the importance of knowledge perception in the learning process as a means of measuring students' readiness in development of their chosen subject. Further, the inclusiveness of (CMs) in the learning environment creates an enabling environment where verbal communication with native speakers ensures better comprehension of the English language [27]. Therefore, formation of classroom discussions provides for a tested learning process (a criterion-based test to measure and assess students) that augments retention abilities among ESL students. Even with the slow pace of progress when using classroom discussions, a learner understands vocabulary, figurative speech, and writing skills improve based on the available expressive environment [23]. The critical contribution of text-oriented and reader-oriented approaches ensures quality in classroom discussions where students become part of an academic forum that allows member participation. Al-Fadda [24], argued in his study that academic writing requires a cognitive approach; he utilized three main questions to determine students' perspectives on stresses, teaching and the interactive role of instructors in the academic writing process. Thus, issues faced in (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia) KSA Universities have a chance to resolve difficulties, by implementing classroom discussion approaches as a means toward improving the stylistic qualities and appreciate differences highlighted in spoken and written English. This pedagogical approach helps promote interactivity to address intellectual knowledge for active learning [28,29].

#### **2.5. Technological advancements**

The number of colleges that utilize technological innovations has gained momentum with the aim of incorporating selected technological platforms in ESL instruction such as virtual learning environments (VLEs). Students learning through Internet based applications form part of an evolving ESL learning process influenced by vagaries of globalization. This vast quest for globalization contributes to the sharing of knowledge across cultural boundaries [30]. When instructors deal with audiences from different cultural backgrounds and

educational qualifications, they inevitably have to create a common ground for seamless communication. Colleges that utilize social networking sites (SNS) help provide this environment resulting in a multi-cultured academic exchange [31]. The use of SNS transfers classroom-based discussions to a technological platform. Therefore, instructors that identify appropriate SNS and other tools like web 2.0 technologies for classroom use, help exemplify critical milestones to enhance the learning process through the identified elements within the applications.

Social networking sites played an expressive role for Malaysian TESL students whose satisfaction when learning ESL comes with gained motivation and empowerment. The newly acquired empowerment exemplifies acquisition of a wide knowledge base in English expressed when students interact with confidence through the SNS [31]. Although technology functions as a means of improving the classroom experience, SNS and other tools also come with challenges that limit the implementation process. For instance, students in third world countries may experience lower levels of exposure to technology that may culminate into technological impediments. These learners may fail to exhibit interest in the SNS tools because these advancements are not part of their daily lives.

Instructors dealing with ESL students in an online classroom have varied pedagogical challenges while teaching academic writing. For example, instructors and students might experience unsynchronized communication in online writing classes due to technological challenges that may curtail the effectiveness of teaching methods [32]. In this context a lack of face-to-face integration may deter instructors' ability to elaborate on academic writing concepts. Stine [33] noted that possible online issues might inhibit learning discourses, and become problematic for students learning the written word. This seems to suggest that ESL students require constant monitoring in order to check their academic writing process. Technical glitches such as unstable internet connections or login failures may occur anytime during the computer-mediated sessions curtailing effective learning.

### **3. Strategies and recommendations**

#### ***3.1. Instructional methods***

Research conducted by Arlow and Neustadt [34] suggested various ways for instructors to adapt student learning and interaction through techniques such as adapted texts, visual aids, and graphic organizers that facilitate ESL students to interact with others in the second language. Students are likely to improve depending on the type of genre-based approach that instructors implement in their writing instructions [23]. Therefore, instructors that focus solely on conventional grammar lessons without incorporating conscious awareness activities may witness poor learner outcomes. By contrast, instructors that provide their students with instructional tools to understand the meaning of their writing are likely to empower ELLs towards advancement. Improvement is contingent on instructors developing a community environment in which ESL students can draw from real-life examples [35].

ESL students need to have confidence in their writing capabilities [24]. In that case, instructors that teach students effectively in order for them to gain skills in paraphrasing and summarizing assignments, also encourage collaboration and enhanced social skills [36,37,38]. When students build confidence in their writing skills, they can face challenges in their academic discourse. These ESL students need adequate time in order to develop their academic prose. Therefore, instructors should use this time to reinforce vocabulary and other grammatical structures [39]. In addition, Dunn [40] identified the need to investigate student capacities, attitudes, and perceptions in order to develop writing programs that suit learners. These needs in retrospect become a foundation for encoding and processing information for ESL learners who are either active or reflective when they process information [41].

### ***3.2. Social networking sites and language learning***

Today, learning English is important in the era of globalization because it enables people to communicate effectively. Admittedly, educators implement different types of pedagogies to teach academic writing, but those instructors that apply teacher-centered pedagogy tend to produce poorer learner outcomes. These students lack interactions in the classroom, which culminates into poorer practice of knowledge acquired. One critical solution is to introduce social networking sites (SNSs) in the classroom to facilitate ESL students interaction and discussion on their assignments [31]. The SNSs are likely to culminate into higher levels of knowledge, motivation, and confidence among the ESL students. However, SNS can have implications on pedagogy when integrating academic writing into the language classroom [42], as some students may have difficulty when using computers. Thus, encouragement and assurance from instructors is imperative for ESL students' confidence in using technology. The SNSs provide students a platform to share their experiences, interests, opinions, and fears. SNSs include Facebook, Twitter, and Myspace among others, which are popular with young people.

In recent research, the term *blog-assisted language learning* [43], has taken on a new dimension for learners and teachers where interactions take place beyond the classroom. Colleges that use blogs to replace the traditional blackboard, create important platforms of interaction to enhance teaching and learning [44,45]. Therefore, instructors should encourage students to post questions and responses in these blogs. This strategy is convenient for both students and instructors allowing learners to have almost immediate feedback, because increased use of SNSs not only enhances communication but it also leads to student motivation [46]. Students are likely to interact with a larger audience and hence broaden their experiences. Instructors who use SNSs provide an important means of fostering a global perspective in classroom activities that are important for integration [31]. These perspectives provide students with an opportunity to participate in the blogs, read other students' ideas, and receive feedback from instructors. In order for technological integration to succeed, learners must access computers and internet services from within or outside their classrooms.

### ***3.3. Integration of peer review***

Peer review is one of the most effective pedagogical tools while dealing with ESL learners [47], [48]. In the classroom, during the peer review process, students are able to review their peers' papers to identify and

highlight positive qualities in their writing prose. In addition, students are comfortable discussing their experiences or challenges with other peers. However, instructors must create a platform in which students can discuss openly without fear of criticism from their peers [49]. Moreover, instructors should take precedence in offering advice to students after reviewing the peer reviews. Advice is essential for students to learn the importance of writing and reading in academic discourses to facilitate their advancement and academic prose. Therefore, instructors must focus on metacognitive awareness among their students through engagement and collaboration that helps learners write accurately [50]. This awareness helps instructors to distinguish between metacognitive knowledge and actions in writing assignments [51]. Once students understand these differences, the chances of academic success increase. Thus, it is essential for instructors to implement explicit instructions and allow student reflections in the classroom or online. As stated by Tseng, Chu, Hwang, and Tsai [52], these reflections contribute to students' learning support to help identify their weaknesses and take charge of their language learning.

### ***3.4. Emphasis on teacher's feedback***

Corrective feedback is an important aspect for ESL learning and L2 writing. When teachers use effective assessments and prompt feedback, they improve the quality in an ELLs classroom. However, Hedgcock and Lefkowitz [53] erred on the side of caution as over-correction could lead to inhibiting students' writing progress. In addition, instructors can use an effective assessment and feedback process to encourage accountability, which instructors and students should express. Instructors' feedback works well in both formal and informal environments, because it indicates their commitment to classroom work and follows up on students' welfare when participating in other activities outside the classroom. The learning process should include constant reminders that incorporation of technology such as multimedia environments and electronic devices like dictionaries, allow students to reflect, display competencies, and gain new vocabulary [54,55]. Students well versed in their respective native languages can have assessments and feedback tailored to their strengths in English, which can serve as a formative ongoing evaluation. Instructors who further emphasize direct commentaries on structure, vocabulary, and grammar accuracy help alleviate the possibility of vagueness that could otherwise make interpretation harder for ESL students. For example, crossing out words and providing alternatives or reworded sentences help learners identify what they need to do for revision. Thus, direct comments provide guidance and explicit instructions for revisions. Furthermore, students who choose not to comply whenever teachers provide feedback retain less information than their counterparts who do comply. Through close observation of their students, instructors need to insist on revised materials in alignment with feedback comments [56]. Thus, teachers are able to run effective ESL classrooms when they emphasize prompt feedback from students.

### ***3.5. Enhancement of a non-discriminatory classroom***

Research carried out at a Canadian university shows that when diversity increases in higher education, so do the challenges for educators and students. Native instructors can express the function of a supportive environment in terms of their accommodative nature especially when ESL students are visiting or immigrating into a foreign country. In most cases L2 ESL students experience language shock as they adapt between cultures [57,58,59], a

process called acculturation, but this transition between cultures eases when native speakers appreciate the diversity that characterizes ESL students [60]. The hindrance to learning associated with new environments is also subject to other social stereotyping based on race, religion, geographical predisposition, and political inclinations. Instructors need to use their expertise to address issues of diversity in the classroom. For instance, in the United States political antagonism characterizes issues related to immigration, which makes immigrants' adjustments to life a difficult task [61]. The instructor and native English speakers must be in accord with the acclimatization process targeted at ESL students coming in as visitors, foreign students, or immigrants. Moreover, instructors who accommodate cultural diversity encourage retention of cultural identity among ESL students and help prevent cultural power struggles that might derail the learning process.

Whenever working with ESL students, instructors should focus on preset standards (norm-referenced assessment and teaching) that will guide class sessions regardless of the status of students [62]. In a competitive learning environment, ESL students without basic skills in English should not be discriminated against. Furthermore, inclusive classrooms help instill high levels of interaction between diverse student populations during the learning process. Moreover, when instructors employ a rich discourse they can easily stimulate students and help boost the learning process [48]. When interacting with native English speakers within the same school system, ESL students increase their strategic competence to facilitate language development [63]. This competence helps students internalize language and develop strong literacy skills to augment contextual understanding, which students exhibit in their respective native languages. In order to establish a classroom setup that incorporates inclusiveness, teachers need a fully-fledged ELL curriculum supported by the school community [26]. Thus, when instructors strive to update ESL teaching requirements based on increasing ELLs with diverse backgrounds, they are likely to boost the credibility of the education system.

### ***3.6. Effective online program***

In the context of the learning environment, cognitive and social backgrounds intertwine with technology [64] to help instructors improve efficiency and effective pedagogy in the classroom courses and assignments. These learning environments are often rich with activity [65], and with the aim of integrating technology to improve students' learning and pedagogical methods [66]. When instructors utilize technology, they are able to help support sharing of course content, which reinforces the learning process. In addition, an effective online program will also assist educators in creating an ESL instructors' community that augments the course content based on various experiences. E-learning related software customized for an ESL classroom would refine instructors' strategies and more likely result in higher student learning [67].

## **4. Discussion and conclusions**

The analyses of numerous academic texts indicated that instructors who use pedagogical methods centered on classroom concepts and ESL learners' experiences, help create a learning environment that becomes a community of acknowledgement for better writing [35]. The instructors' ability to reduce stereotype barriers and identify students' needs remains a high priority. When learners identify with their needs on the writing program, they can improve their learning process and actively participate with interest. This identification forms part of

what Fendler [11] implied as the common good, meaning that it is the instructors' responsibility to ensure the classroom environment is free from stereotyping and accepting of learner differences. Acceptance encourages learners to express their prior acquired language skills before they begin actual classroom discourse, and allows for a positive environment where feedback can take place. Therefore, encouraging writing during the learning process provides a positive mindset that helps learners understand academic discourse requirements where writing fluency can be developed [17].

Despite the challenges instructors face during the instructional process, they need to remain focused on the long-term goal of providing pedagogical strategies that integrate students' needs. Therefore, instructors' motivation toward students' improvement is important in order to devise different strategies in favor of each individual in the classroom. Instructors need to boost confidence among ESL students in order to help learners identify their own strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, students' writing abilities emerge from constant practice and oral interactions between instructors and students. Conversely, students need guidance and encouragement in order to work beyond their challenges. Peer review remains a feasible option to consider in the classroom because it allows students to discuss their ideas openly. This openness creates a free environment and an effective tool that benefits students and instructors [68]. When dealing with their colleagues, students learn to accept and correct their mistakes without fear of scorn or judgment.

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