

Supporting EAL Learners

Writing in a second or other language at the university level is one of the biggest challenges many English as an Additional Language (EAL) students face. Some students find the process extremely frustrating, as they consider themselves to be competent, confident, and articulate writers in their first language, but find that they do not have the vocabulary or the command of complex grammatical structures that are needed to convey their ideas into English.

Language itself is not the only issue that makes writing in English particularly challenging for EAL writers. Writers from other academic cultures often need to unlearn old practises and adjust to a new way of writing, organizing one's ideas, and structuring an argument. For example, in some traditions, the thesis statement appears at the end of an essay after, and only after, the argument supporting it has been fully developed. In other traditions, the standard essay may require artful digressions from the topic. Many written traditions favour a much more indirect style than North American academic writing. In these traditions, spelling out cause and effect too explicitly can be considered condescending to the reader, i.e. the writer's job is to carefully lay out the facts, leaving the reader to connect the dots. In some written traditions, a skilful writer will weave in the words of authorities in ways that may be considered plagiarism in a North American context. As one final example, the culture of writing in some countries favours the display of sophisticated language and poetic embellishment, even in academic writing. To these writers, North American writing may seem drab or even childish.

As a result of careful training in another tradition, some students can come across as untrained writers in a North American context. However, with a little extra guidance, over time many students are able to write clear, compelling papers on a variety of topics for classes in diverse fields. Presented here are several suggestions that you may find useful when helping your students succeed with their written assignments:

Assignment Design

Get to know your students. Learn their writing processes or their concerns for the class. If they are open to it, ask them if there are specific areas that they would like to receive feedback on. Schedule meetings with them during various points in the semester in order to discuss their ideas, organization, and planning, and to make sure they are on the right track with their assignments.

Break down assignments. Be sure to provide clear, detailed assignment sheets with clear deliverables and requirements. Take some time to go through the assignment sheet with students. Rephrase any language that is overly specialized, technical, colloquial, or ambiguous.

Give students the opportunity to ask questions about the assignment either in class or during office hours. Some students are too shy to ask questions during the class itself and may want to speak with you immediately after class. Ask students to explain the assignment to you in their own words, rather than asking them if they understand the assignment, i.e. avoid yes / no questions. Some EAL students are unaccustomed to a direct style, and will not otherwise admit knowledge deficit to an authority figure. Establishing a good rapport with students is a good way to break down potential communication barriers.

Encourage students to adopt a simple, direct style. Let them know you value clarity of expression over eloquence and sophisticated vocabulary. This will alleviate a lot of pressure on EAL students, and will prevent students from overusing the thesaurus. This will encourage students to begin to find their written voice.

Emphasize 'process' rather than 'product' writing. Build stages into your assignments, i.e. a topic approval stage, proposal stage, and/or draft stage, in order to give students early feedback. Consider using a guided peer-editing session to help students revise their first drafts. Some instructors allow students to re-submit final papers once they have received feedback. Only some students will take advantage of this opportunity to elevate their grade on a paper, and it is usually these students who will get the most out of your feedback and the revision process itself. You might also encourage your students to bring their proposals or rough drafts to Student Learning Support programs (i.e. Writing Centre or English Language Support) for a one-on-one tutoring session.

Incorporate low-stakes writing assignments into your course. In addition to the main written assignments for the course, consider including low-stakes assignments, such as quick take-home or in-class assignments for little or no marks. These might include reading responses or index cards where students summarize key concepts from the lecture in one or two sentences. These assignments offer students low-pressure opportunities to practice critical thinking skills and exercise their 'writing muscle.'

Provide models. Students may find it helpful to see models of strong writing to give them an idea of what they are working toward. This is particularly helpful in answering questions about structure, voice, and proper use of sources. Think about collecting these models from previous years. If you are concerned that students will mimic the models too closely, offer them examples with a range of styles and structures and draw attention to the diversity of approach. Again, this will encourage students to find their written voice.

Use explicit rubrics. It is helpful for your students to see, in writing, the grading criteria that you use. One option is to have students develop the rubric as a class, based on each assignment. This will encourage students to really think about and anticipate the qualities that you'll be looking for in their papers. Whether you come up with the rubric, or have the class design it as an activity, make sure this rubric is widely available (posted on D2L or handed out with the assignment sheet).

Providing Effective Feedback

What to tackle first - content or form? What if surface errors distract from the message? Focus first on content and then approach grammar and usage problems in the context of their writing.

- **Feedback on Content:** EAL students often feel as though their language errors have eclipsed their ideas, and this can lead to a sense of frustration or not feeling heard.
 - **Read through the paper once through without circling, correcting, or annotating a single grammatical error and responding solely to the content and ideas.** The information may not be organized in exactly the way you are used to, but there may be a very clear pattern, so be a flexible reader as you are taking in the information. Add a short note at the end of the paper. Here, give feedback on strengths as well as areas for improvement, discussing the ideas presented and the overall structure of the argument. It's also helpful to raise provocative questions for the student to consider. You might also give a few concrete suggestions for improvements or areas to work on in the next assignment.
 - **Phrase your responses in ways that are text-specific and instructive.** "Text-specific" comments are those that can only be written on that specific text. They are motivating because they reflect the reader's genuine engagement with the writer's text. Comments such as "Good. Develop." or "Awkward" could be stamped on any student's paper – they won't help guide the student toward what needs to be done to improve their writing. Comments such as "Good. Add

example" or "More info about disease progression would help me understand treatment phases" may take a bit longer to write, but such comments give students very individual feedback and clear instruction about their specific text.

- **Adjust feedback according to the assignment.** Try to focus on content and be positive on low stakes assignments. This boosts confidence and motivates students to concentrate on the message of the assignment (and less on sentence level errors – which often receive a disproportionate amount of attention).
- **Feedback on Grammar / Usage**
 - **Minimize grammar markup.** Most students will benefit minimally, if at all, from a grammatical markup of their entire paper. In the absence of explicit grammatical instruction, it is difficult for most students to deduce grammatical rules from a series of corrections and apply them in new contexts. Consider marking up only one paragraph for grammatical and usage errors to give the students a sense of the number of errors that they are making.
 - **Ignore the language mistakes that do not obscure meaning,** especially in the early stages. When you find a severely obstructive mistake, ask students to "tell me more about what you're trying to say here" so you can help them find the language to express their ideas.
 - **When students ask for grammatical feedback:**
 - Concentrate on errors that severely obstruct the meaning.
 - Ask students to identify specific structures they'd like grammatical feedback on.
 - Choose one or two types of errors to concentrate on, such as verb tense. You will overwhelm yourselves and your students if you mark every error at the same time. Choose the most frequent or what seems most important at the moment.
 - Mark those errors without correcting them. Give students time to self-correct (alone or with others) and invite them to talk with you about the mistakes that they cannot correct independently.
 - Have students book an appointment with English Language Support (ELS) where grammar and usage errors will be explained in more detail. The ELS website also contains helpful resources and handouts

EAL students need frequent, guided practise using language – writing, reading, listening, and speaking – to develop as academic writers. Instructors are the course experts, who ultimately have the challenging task of helping students learn specific written genres and conventions. By focusing primarily on the content of student writing, instructors convey to students the importance of a well-designed, well-reasoned argument, and of audience expectations.

Better writing and better learning will take place if students are given opportunities to carry a piece of writing through a process that includes class discussion on a topic, critical analysis of sources, drafting, revising, getting feedback, and proofreading.

Adapted from:

- Supporting ESL Students, Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCADU)
- Tips on Teaching ESL Students, University of North Carolina
- Working with ESL students' writing, The University of Hawaii