Recognizing Deaf Writers as Second Language Learners:

Transforming the Approach to Working with ASL Speakers in the Writing Center

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Introduction

As a writing consultant at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi's Center for Academic Student Achievement (CASA) Writing Center, I have worked with writers whose first languages are not English. I have consulted with Vietnamese, Japanese, and Spanish speaking students among many others as the center provides access for a range of students from different cultural backgrounds. Because CASA welcomes all students, the center trains consultants in specific strategies for working with second language learners (L2) on their writing. In addition to providing professional development training that implements L2 scholarship, the center also prepares consultants to help students with disabilities. This training consists of bi-weekly meetings during the fall and spring semesters to ensure the consultants are thoroughly prepared to work with students in the center. Through the training and meetings, consultants read assigned articles over writing center and composition theory and pedagogy and participate in projects and discussions. The assigned articles consultants read for training may be related to working with specific kinds of students such as Veterans and athletes, examining the importance of collaboration with other consultants and strategies for spotting error patterns.

As a consultant who often worked with L2 students and grew up in multilingual environments, I found the articles on second language pedagogy particularly interesting and beneficial in helping me understand how to best assist students working with English as a second language. For instance, in the training designated specifically to prepare consultants for L2 learners in the writing center, we read Bartholomae's (1980) "The Study of Error," in which we learned to analyze and close read errors in student writing:

> If we learn to treat the language of basic writing *as* language and assume, as we do when writers violate our expectations in more conventional ways, that the unconventional features in the writer are evidence of intention and that they are, therefore, meaningful, then we can chart systematic choices, individual strategies, and characteristic processes of thought. (p. 255)

This article taught me, as a consultant, not to scan through papers for errors, but to examine thoughtfully the writer's choices, which in turn helped me identify how to best assist the writer. Along with Bartholomae (1980), consultants also read Rafoth's (2015) *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers* as well as other scholars, all of which presented us with ways of examining L2 writing and helping students in their writing process by making sure to go through the process slowly to ensure the students understand the concepts before moving on. In addition, we also read articles on students with disabilities. Daniels, Babcock, and Daniels (2015) discuss inclusivity in the writing center and the importance of not assuming students have a disability, but allowing students to disclose their disability on their own. For instance, Daniels et al. (2015) suggest that consultants ask students a "generic type of question at the beginning of all consultations" such as *is there anything you would like me to know about your writing before we get started?* (p.22). This inquiry then allows students in the center the opportunity to talk about their disability if they so choose. Thus, the training on students with disabilities offers ways for consultants to navigate sessions by making sure the students feel comfortable, similar to the prior L2 training.

While the disability training at the writing center works well to familiarize consultants with ways to assist students with disabilities, Deaf student writers do not receive sufficient attention since these trainings do not focus on them as second language learners. Throughout this

article, I refer to people who are Deaf (capital D) specifically because these are the people whose first form of communication is sign language and they identify within the Deaf Culture (Babcock, 2011). Although attention should be paid to deaf writers and students whose first language is not sign language, I focus specifically on Deaf writers because my personal involvement working with a Deaf writer who communicated via American Sign Language (ASL) showed me how her writing experience was similar to that of L2 writers. Once I started consulting Deaf writer, Alex[1], I began to seek out more research on Deaf writers and L2 scholarship. I also began connecting the similarities in the approaches to working with L2 writers and students with disabilities. For instance, some L2 scholarship focuses on the importance of assisting with grammar, lexical issues, and sentence structure when working with L2 writers because these components enhance the clarity of the text, thereby effectively communicating their intended purpose (Eckstein, 2016; Myers, 2003; Nakamaru, 2010; Rafoth, 2015). Likewise, scholarship focused on writers with disabilities, such as Deaf writers, urges for more attention to grammar since it often overlaps with content (Babcock & Thonus, 2012). Ultimately, what I found indicated that disabilities scholarship and L2 scholarship focuses on both being directive with these students *and* understanding that content and grammar may be equally important depending on the situation. Nonetheless, I eventually noticed that, while these strategies do help, they were not enough for Alex. In talking with Alex's interpreter, I realized that I had failed to make explicit connections between the writer's first language, ASL, and her second language, English. Once I recognized the student's struggle to adhere to the conventions of Standard English, I also saw a gap in writing center scholarship, particularly between how second

[1] Name changed to provide student anonymity.

language learners are placed in one category and Deaf writers in another. Based on my experiences, I see the need to address the similarities between the two groups.

While the scholarship of recent decades has provided helpful strategies for and studies based on both second language learners and Deaf students, these two categories have not been explicitly connected (Babcock, 2012; Eckstein, 2016; Liu, 2016; Myers, 2003; Nakamaru, 2010; Rafoth, 2015; Tuzi, 2004; Williams & Severino, 2004). From the perspective of a writing consultant who worked with L2 writers, I noticed the ways in which the current L2 scholarship relates to how students work through the writing process (Eckstein, 2016; Liu, 2016; Nakamaru, 2010; Rafoth, 2015). However, because I also worked consistently with a Deaf student whose first form of communication is ASL, I noticed the similarities in the way this student approached writing in English to other L2 writers. For instance, Alex often brought the structures and rules of her first language, ASL, into her writing, just as other L2 students bring rules and structures from their first languages. Although some current strategies for Deaf writers and L2 students when seen in separate categories may work well for assisting students in the center, we need to start including ASL communicators within the category of second language learners. By including ASL communicators within the L2 category, we can directly acknowledge the ways in which Deaf writers bring ASL into their Standard English writing as well as better prepare writing centers to assist students whose primary form of communication is ASL.

To explain the importance of bridging the gap between L2 students and Deaf students, I first outline my experience working as a writing consultant with Deaf writer, Alex, pointing out the specific areas I failed to successfully address due to not making the connection between this student's first and second languages. Next, I make connections between the writing sessions I worked through with Alex and current scholarship on second language learners to clearly explain

how the conversations in the field of second language pedagogy relates to this Deaf student's experience as well. Finally, I explore the ways in which Deaf writers fit in the category of L2 and the possible solutions to be made in connecting the categories and acknowledging ASL writers of English as second language learners.

Tutoring Sessions with an ASL Communicator

When I first began working with Alex, a Deaf undergraduate student, at the writing center, I did not make the connection to L2 writers. Instead, I focused on how I could navigate the barriers we, tutor and student, faced in communicating, all of which from my perspective related directly to Alex's disability. For instance, when Alex first came to the center, she did not have an interpreter; thus, we spoke to each other via handwriting back and forth on spiral notebooks. While this communication process was definitely challenging since handwriting feedback proved time consuming, I also noticed very little improvement in Alex's writing. No matter how many times Alex came to the center for an appointment or how much I tried to explain something, she always seemed to ask the same questions. Alex's questions often focused on grammar and sentence structure, asking if what she wrote was correct. Sometimes Alex would ask about citation methods or wanted me to explain her teacher's assignment prompt, but these questions always fell predominantly in the category of grammatical concerns. Specifically, Alex often wanted me to go through her paper and edit or "fix" her grammatical mistakes, despite my reminders that, because the center is not an editing service, I could not just go through her paper and change things without her understanding of why things may need to be changed. Although I did not recognize it at that time, Alex's deep concern for grammatical correctness related to L2 scholarship as L2 students often expect and desire grammatical help from writing tutors (Eckstein, 2016). I was so focused on avoiding simply editing Alex's paper and trying to get her

to self-correct through my explanations of grammar rules, I did not think that there may have been a problem with my understanding of how to approach Alex's particular grammatical concerns.

I then realized Alex did not simply have problems with grammar, but she was bringing some of the structures and rules of ASL into her writing, such as flipping the English sentence structure and omitting words altogether. I was familiar with other L2 writers transferring structures from L1, such as in the Indonesian language, *Bahasa Indonesia*, where writers may omit articles and confuse the singular and plural when writing in English; however, it had not occurred to me to look for the same indicator in Alex's writing. I finally came to this realization when Alex set up weekly appointments with me and started bringing an interpreter to help in our communication process. The interpreter arrived to Alex's appointment early one day and we talked about the differences between English and ASL. I learned that the structure of ASL is different from English and sometimes prepositions and articles are omitted. For instance, if an ASL speaker were to say "I'm going to the writing center tomorrow" in English, the ASL form would be more like "tomorrow writing center I go." This sentence structure is not only flipped, but also omits words that may seem unnecessary such as "to" and "the," which many ASL speakers ignore completely when communicating with each other.

The interpreter's explanation of the ASL structure alerted me to Alex's error patterns in English. From that session on, I approached the sessions with a plan to work with Alex the way the writing center had trained me to assist L2 writers. When I noticed inverted English sentences such as "globalization research I do," I recognized it as an example of Alex's first language (ASL) blending into her attempts to write in Standard English. Instead of simply explaining the rules of English structure, I related the sentence to Alex's own language and made explicit

connections as to why it is flipped in English, taking into account the legitimacy of Alex's first language. In approaching this problem with "In ASL you word it this way? Standard written English requires a different structure" and then expanding on the rules of English, I not only made a connection between the languages, but also showed Alex there was nothing wrong with her first language. Still, I emphasized that she would have to follow English writing structures if she wanted to ensure less confusion for English readers, i.e., her audience. I connected this approach to Babcock's (2012) assertions that sometimes Lower Order Concerns (LOCs), such as grammar and sentence structure, must take precedence over content because Deaf writers may need explicit explanations to express their ideas. This assertion about Deaf writers relates directly to the L2 training I received as a writing consultant at the center, since I was taught that sometimes LOCs must take priority depending on the L2 writer's needs. Although Babcock's (2012) assertions prove helpful, without making a direct connection to Deaf writers' first language as we do for L2 writers, we cannot as easily pick out the error patterns nor explain them as sufficiently when working with Deaf writers.

ASL Connections to L2 Scholarship

Non-Directive vs. Directive in the Writing Center

While my experience working with a Deaf writer included my own revelation in focusing on her second and first language when explaining error patterns, much of my approach included emphasizing more directive feedback when working with the writer. Directive feedback consists of being clear and specific with students as to what they need to work on, rather than allowing students to reach the answer on their own by asking questions, which refers to non-directive feedback. In this section, I connect my experience working with Alex to current scholarship on

L2 students, specifically in the ways the conversations emphasize the importance of recognizing non-directive vs. directive tutoring strategies. While much writing center pedagogy encourages writing consultants/tutors to cultivate a more non-directive approach so that students remain in complete control of their writing, recent scholarship on second language learners counters this practice, advocating for more directive approaches. For instance, Eckstein (2016) notes Blau and Hall's study on L2 writers showed that writers who received direct advice on language structure were able to make deeper meaning of the language. While this study focused on the importance of making meaning with grammatical assistance, Eckstein (2016) also discusses L2 writers' desire for a better understanding of grammar since 44% of L2 writers within the study described grammar as their top concern. Attending to grammar as a Higher Order Concern in some writing cases, though, proves difficult in writing centers because consultants are trained to focus on content and overall flow of text as a Higher Order Concern, while grammar and sentence structure are considered secondary. The center encourages this hierarchy for multiple reasons, one of which relates to the fact that if students fixed all their grammar in a paper but still needed to work on content, they would have wasted time in cleaning up content that is subject to change. Furthermore, this order is important because overall content is viewed as a higher priority than grammar. Nevertheless, this order sometimes faces conflict when professors place more grade value on grammar than content, or second language learners desire to improve their grammar and seek directive feedback. In fact, Myers (2003) notes that "[m]any international graduate students, in particular, usually have a good idea of what they want to say, but are often at a loss as to how to say it" (p. 52). Thus, these students seek out directive feedback related to grammar and surface level issues.

Because of the rise of second language learners in writing centers and this conflict over directive vs. non-directive feedback, Williams and Severino (2004) have emphasized strategies to assist L2 students. As L2 writers desire more directive feedback, writing centers need to actively seek information on L2 writers and account for the ways in which these writers experience language differently (Williams & Severino, 2004). Further, tutors must be more directive with L2 students in certain situations and act as "cultural informants" (Myers, 2003; Willams & Severino, 2004). In this strategy, the feedback is not simply editing, or telling the writer what to do, but allowing writers to negotiate, as Liu (2016) puts it, between their first language and their second language, providing more opportunity to learn as well as facilitate confidence. Thus, the tutor will work to bridge the gap between what writers currently know about English and what they do not, providing upfront explanations rather than getting stuck trying to draw information out of writers with which they are unfamiliar and wish to understand. I experienced this situation firsthand when working with Alex: rather than simply giving her the answer or making her guess the answer to encourage self-reflection, we held discussions about her first and second languages, the structures, the rules, and the cultural aspects. Furthermore, encouraging self-correction "will only succeed if the learner has at least partial mastery over the form," thus, some directive feedback is crucial in the tutoring process (Williams & Severino, 2004, p. 167). This scholarship proves that while some techniques work for native speakers, the same techniques will not be as sufficient for second language learners.

Because such techniques will not work for every writer, scholars pay attention to the unique differences that L2 writers bring to a tutoring session. For instance, Williams (2004) discusses cross-cultural communicative barriers in a study on the communication between tutors and L2 writers, indicating non-directive approaches led to L2 writers simply guessing for an

answer. Instead, Williams (2004) advocates for a "show" and "explain" rather than "asking" or "telling" (p.195). For example, a tutor who models writing strategies would be taking part in showing and explaining. In my work with Alex, I modeled sentences and then we would work together to come to an understanding of why I wrote the sentences in a particular order, rather than simply telling her "this is how you do it." This approach emphasizes directive strategies that does not require Alex to come up with an answer on her own, but it also does not simply give her the answer like an editor would, because there is still a component of explanation that facilitates learning. This detailed feedback consistently shows up in recent scholars' work, such as Séror's (2011) study that reveals students find peer feedback helpful since it offers more detailed descriptions on how to improve writing, including grammar as well as content. While writing consultants and tutors do sometimes struggle to maintain focus on global issues while still meeting L2 writers' requests for lexical and syntactic assistance, these components relate directly to making meaning of a text (Nakamaru, 2010). Because of this significance, Rafoth (2015) notes that writing centers must prepare "tutors to help writers navigate" the global and local issues, recognizing that they overlap and work together (p. 5). Thus, such scholarship does not contradict writing center pedagogy against editing. Rather, it offers a balance and an understanding that students working in a second language need more direct feedback as they do not always have prior knowledge on specific rules or guidelines of their second language and cannot pick it up through non-directive probing. I experienced this balance in my training at the CASA writing center as I learned about the ways in which to adapt when working with the students and shift from non-directive to more directive depending on the L2 students' needs.

How Deaf Learners Fit In

Just as L2 scholarship points out, Deaf students also need more directive feedback to account for their possible lack of prior knowledge in the English language. For instance, Babcock and Thonus (2012) pointed out that when tutors work with Deaf writers, they may sometimes accidentally read papers aloud. While reading papers aloud is a common practice to help the students self-correct and catch phrases that might "sound funny" or identify where they might have omitted necessary words, this strategy does not help Deaf writers. This failure is similar to that faced by L2 writers; reading papers aloud does not always work for them since they generally have a "less developed sense of what 'sounds right'" in their second language (Williams & Severino, 2004, p.167). Furthermore, Babcock's (2011) study revealed Deaf writers' preference for directive approaches to tutoring as well as their potential struggles with cultural issues, another similar struggle of L2 writers. This connection to cultural issues relates to Williams and Severino's (2004) assertion that tutors need to be more directive in their role as cultural informants with L2 writers since L2 and Deaf writers may not be fully versed in the cultural norms of Standard English. Hence, Babcock (2012) emphasizes the importance of implementing focus on both Higher Order Concerns (HOCs) as well as Lower Order Concerns (LOCs), despite the fact that writing center pedagogy often encourages tutors to prioritize HOCs over LOCs for most students. Thus, the scholarship comes full circle as L2 pedagogy emphasizes this shift in non-directive toward directive strategies, similar to writing center research on writers with disabilities, as Babcock (2012) brings up the importance of finding a balance between HOCs and LOCs. This balance proves important since L2 writers, and here I am including Deaf writers in this category, bring the cultural and linguistic forms of their first languages into their use of Standard English. The importance of recognizing language interference, as noted by Babcock (2012), relates to Deaf writers' experiences when writing in their second language.

Recognizing the effects of students' first languages upon their second language writing proves significant as it may help tutors approach error patterns more clearly, recognizing that the writers' patterns relate to a logical structure in their first language. ASL speakers, as with other second language learners, are used to a different structure. During my work with Alex, I learned of some of the many differences between ASL and English. For instance, for speed of communication, ASL leaves out many words that English speakers use because they are unnecessary in ASL, such as articles. Additionally, ASL's structure is also different from English as some sentence structures are inverted from the standard Subject-Verb-Object arrangement. These differences between languages relate back to the ways in which other L2 writers bring aspects of their own first language into their second. This difference is important because, while many scholars focus on Deaf writers within the disability category, the uniqueness of their language is often forgotten. Overlooking ASL is even more problematic since the language has not always been valued as a legitimate language and has even been previously "discouraged" from being used in deaf schools (Yule, 2014, p. 200). ASL, nevertheless, is intricate and legitimate as the signs' structures, movements, and locations as well as facial expressions and finger spelling create meaning as nuanced and articulate as oral languages (Yule, 2014). Thus, it is helpful for writing centers to look at Deaf writers as L2 learners since they are experiencing English similarly to the ways in which other L2 learners do and they must work through their natural inclination to include their first language's structures within their Standard English writing.

Proposition: Including Deaf Writers in the L2 Category

Because ASL is a legitimate language, with structures and grammatical rules of its own just as any other language, I propose a new framework for looking at the ways in which we can

tutor and work with ASL communicators both in the writing center and in other tutoring situations. While Babcock (2012) has provided much scholarship on working with Deaf students and has given me the initial tools to connect Deaf writers to L2 students, I advocate further research to examine ASL writers not only in the category of disabilities, but also within the context of other second language writers. I believe this approach will provide writing centers and writing consultants better clarification in tutoring Deaf students for they will look for language patterns, just as they would for other second language learners. The following includes solutions I propose for including Deaf writers in the category of second language learners for writing centers:

Consultants receive training strategies for working with L2 students

While Babcock (2012) suggests writing centers be more prepared for Deaf students and encourages writing centers to specifically train their tutors to communicate in ASL, such as learning to fingerspell so that they become "familiar with readings on dialect and language interference in writing" (p. 179), I do not suggest the same. It would be ideal if all consultants in the center could communicate fluidly in ASL so that they could better assist Deaf writers and, I have found it to be very rewarding when I was able to sign a few words with Alex because my signing has helped build rapport and further legitimize the importance of ASL as a language. However, I understand that not all consultants will be able to learn ASL. Furthermore, not all consultants will be able to learn the other first languages of students that come into the writing center such as Spanish, Japanese, Korean, and etc. Despite consultants' inability to speak every language, writing consultants are prepared for L2 writers through training, meetings, and frequent readings on L2 pedagogy. Thus, to better assist ASL communicators, training must include ASL information in the L2 category. This training requires that future L2 scholarship

should include Deaf writers within their studies, because this could provide writing centers the material and guidance to include Deaf writers when talking about L2 learners.

Consultants learn to balance between grammar and content

While the struggle between directive and non-directive feedback and the balance between grammar and content exists within L2 scholarship currently (Eckstein, 2016; Nakamaru, 2010; Rafoth, 2015; Williams & Severino, 2004), I find it important to note specifically the importance of this issue in relation to ASL speakers. For instance, both categories, disabilities and second language learners, focus on these topics. In Babcock's (2011) study on Deaf students, she explains directive feedback worked most frequently in these sessions and tutors need to be flexible in the ways they approach writers' needs. Furthermore, Rafoth's (2015) research on second language learners showed it is important to prepare tutors to work with diverse writers and become more directive when necessary. I find both examples important, and the CASA writing center trained me to adapt and switch between being directive and non-directive in sessions depending on students' needs, but in order to more effectively use these strategies in the writing center, these separate categories need to be connected. When working with Alex, I recognized that in some instances I had to focus on grammar first to reach full understanding of the content. This approach was not simply because Alex has a disability, but it was because Alex was using ASL structures in her writing. If I did not understand her mixing of language, I would not have been able to effectively explain to Alex how to best communicate her message to her audience.

Conclusion

Ultimately, L2 learners and ASL communicators must be connected, for consultants and tutors must be adaptable to accommodate all writers. All writers deserve the same opportunities

and the writing center is to be a place accessible to everyone. Therefore, we look at each individual writers' needs and provide them the best feedback possible. In implementing second language strategies when working with Deaf students, and in examining ASL as a language with unique properties that influences the writer's second language, I believe we will provide writers a better opportunity to improve their writing, implement revisions, and internalize strategies for writing projects in their future. The scholarship I found when researching this topic as well as through personal development training at the writing center provided the basis for my understanding of L2 students and students with disabilities. I recognize the significance of the training I received from the writing center and the work the scholars in the field have put forth in making writing centers a more accessible and welcoming place to all students. In experiencing firsthand consultations with a Deaf student, I recognized the need to expand our definition of L2 to include Deaf writers as well. While this approach may be new to many, it will be beneficial for students seeking help in better understanding the English language. Going back to Bartholomae's (1980) notion of treating "the unconventional features" in student's writing as "meaningful" (p.255), I believe this concern is of utmost importance if consultants are to offer ASL writers assistance through acknowledging "the unconventional features" and examining the meaning behind these features. By including Deaf writers within the category of L2 writers, we can focus primarily on their language rather than on the disability which will, in turn, offer clarity and understanding between the tutor and the writer which will result in a successful writing collaboration.

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