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Helping Instructors To Address Their Language Needs

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ESL STUDENTS IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING SEMINARS:
HELPING INSTRUCTORS TO ADDRESS THEIR LANGUAGE NEEDS

JUDY PIERPONT

Instructors of First-year Writing Seminars sometimes worry that students whose native language is not English have gotten into their classes without fully knowing English. “What are they doing there?” they wonder. How can they teach them? What are they to do about grammar errors and unusual approaches to assignments? Often the assumption is that ESL courses or someone else should have taken care of all the preparatory work and that by the time these students take First-year Writing Seminars, they should be just about indistinguishable from native-English speakers. Until quite recently, most instructors in the disciplines held such beliefs about the proficiency of non-native speakers. But we know more now about language learning--as we do about learning to write. It isn't a skill that one "gets" once and for all preparatory to doing real thinking about issues and problems in a content area. For non-native speakers (and for native speakers as well in a less dramatic manner) language learning goes on and on. As the concepts that students must deal with become more and more complex and discipline-specific, so the need for new linguistic means emerges over and over, and the students have to rise to new language learning challenges. Certainly, there is a certain level of competence that a non-native speaker needs in order to adequately understand the material, fulfill the assignments, and participate in the class. But, that level being reached, in any new domain, a non-native speaker will find elements of the language unfamiliar, and will still be a language learner--not an incompetent student, or a slow learner, or someone with careless or bad English, but someone who has already mastered a second language to an impressive level and is simply continuing the process in a new domain. Instructors can expect to see signs of this learning—incomplete or inexact expression, mistaken hypotheses about language use, occasional loss of control of grammar or sentence structure, in short, some struggle. But for most ESL students, courses in the disciplines are exactly what they need in order to continue to expand their ability to think and express themselves in English, at the same time learning new language to allow them to do so.

We know that courses in the disciplines are good places for these students to be learning. But the questions return in force about how instructors should teach them if the students have special problems or what they should do about grammar errors and unusual approaches to assignments. Some writing specialists suggest that instructors and tutors

should not attempt to deal with ESL students' errors unless these interfere with comprehensibility. This approach derives in part from the principles of process methodology which, reacting to a long tradition of emphasis on "correctness," say that to attend to error is to shortcut the process through which the student can discover her intentions and develop an authentic voice. Certainly this is a valuable pedagogical principle for ESL students as well as native speakers. The problem is that the principle becomes dogmatic; practitioners come to avoid attending to the language of students' writing in the many ways that are possible because "to attend to language is to focus on error." They justify the strategy by pointing to the facts of language acquisition--ESL students learn certain elements of the language slowly over time, sometimes in a developmental order. Correction as such often doesn't lead to acquisition. This "hands-off" approach seems to be the accepted model for non-ESL specialists working with ESL students in composition courses and writing centers (Harris and Silva).

If principles of writing pedagogy encourage us to read for the over all cogency of ideas, development, and use of language—and not a too-narrow focus on “error,” how can instructors also address students' language issues? The solution is to shift their point of view, learning to see the “language issue” not so much as one of “error” as of lack of linguistic resources. Their concern should be that their students acquire as rapidly as possible the English they need to express their ideas fully. In order to write, read, and think in their college courses, second-language students need adequate language resources, not just the ability to write correctly. To be prepared for a professional life after college, they need a very high level of proficiency in English, which readers, both in the academic and professional worlds, consider important in their evaluation of the writer and the message.

While the English of ESL students does develop naturally over the course of a semester or two, there are ways that their instructors can help them in this task by being constructive and encouraging in their feedback on language.

Understanding the Writing Problems of Second-Language Students

What *are* the writing problems of second-language students in this context? While these students are often exceptionally talented and skilled in a particular area, and for the most part, academically well prepared—often intellectually sophisticated--some may nevertheless not write according to the expectations of their instructors in the disciplines. Their instructors easily recognize some of the familiar weaknesses of freshman writing, similar to those they see in the writing of native English speakers: lack of a coherent argument, insufficient development, and in the realm of grammar, pronoun agreement, tense shifts, and lack of parallel structure. For the most part, their instructors feel they are able to help non-native students where their writing problems appear to be similar to those of native English-speaking students. But instructors often feel ill-equipped to address the more unfamiliar problems of second-language students--their syntactically or idiomatically unusual English, their lack of familiarity with the Western notion of "argument," their inability to comprehend some course texts or class discussion, or their reluctance to participate in class. The issues that seem to concern instructors most entail the unusual linguistic features of their English. Instructors feel less confident about how to address language issues, or even pinpoint the nature of the problem.

What are these language issues then? For the most part, ESL students in First-year Writing Seminars are advanced enough in their knowledge of English that they don't lack basic knowledge of grammatical systems--except perhaps articles, and verb forms used in the conditional. Rather, they lack adequate language resources to express the complexity and nuances of thought in courses that are in many cases more intellectually demanding than any they have previously taken in English. They need to acquire more specific vocabulary and all kinds of conventional word combinations and phrases; they need to know the grammatical constructions associated with the words they choose; and they need to learn expressions that indicate logical relations among ideas, qualification of statements, and attitude towards others' assertions. Without such resources, they cannot express particular and complex ideas. Broadly, they need to learn to sound like writers in the discipline.

Of course, when they don't find the words or expressions they need, they use inappropriate terms, cobble together words they do know into idiosyncratic phrases, sometimes translating as best they can from the native language. Or they may not have a sense of "how to sound" in the kind of English sentences their instructors expect, as they may be relatively unfamiliar with the stylistic expectations for writing in this culture, let alone those for a specific discipline. They may be accustomed to expressing ideas in an

order and style appropriate to their own culture. Some, often immigrant students (as opposed to international students), have the same lack of experience with the vocabulary, expressions, and sentence style as basic writers; they have gone through several years of high school in this country but have not done enough reading and writing, or have not been able to take full advantage of the high school training offered while they were learning the basics of the language. Even when ESL students seem at first to have a very good command of English, it can break down in a number of ways as the demands of thinking and expression begin to exceed their linguistic resources. Occasional, sometimes frequent, errors in grammar can be as much a consequence of cognitive overload as a sign of lack of knowledge of basic grammar. International students who have recently arrived in this country may experience language difficulties quite different from those of immigrant students. They are unaccustomed to the rapid pace of the language used in class, in class discussion in particular, and unfamiliar with its informal and often colloquial turns. Such students may not be able to follow or participate in discussion or may not be able to understand or respond to reading that is situated in an American cultural context or a culture-dependent language with which they have little familiarity.

If their most pressing need is more language, how can students fill the gaps in their language knowledge and learn the more complex realms of vocabulary and usage--and do it rapidly? Of course, language learning is a natural and ongoing process even for adult learners. But the question one might ask is whether ESL learners can improve their English *substantially* within the span of one or two semesters. The answer in most cases, with the right support, is "yes."

The good news for second-language students in writing courses in the disciplines is that language learning proceeds relatively rapidly when the learner is learning through a context for which she needs new language--called in ESL circles "task-based" learning. Reading and writing for a content course constitute such tasks. In this environment, second-language students are already engaged in language learning--picking up terms and means of expression which they need in order to cope. More good news is that most ESL students who are accepted into good colleges have already shown that they are phenomenal language learners; some have been in this country for only a short time and are writing papers at or near freshman level. Most ESL students are picking up new language--especially vocabulary--from one day to the next. Instructors (in fact, the students themselves) are usually not aware of this progress. Rather they are often only aware of the texture of error in a student's writing and its un-English cast, and so perhaps don't notice that from one paper to the next, the student's language resources have improved.

Yet for most of these students, language acquisition doesn't proceed rapidly enough; they need more language for the papers they are writing for their current courses, for papers due next week. With some understanding of how language acquisition proceeds, First-year Writing Seminar instructors can have an important role in facilitating the natural learning that these students are capable of. Instructors might start by considering what accounts for the fact that people learn better in some situations than in others and what "good" language learners do that leads to success. One of the things that good language learners do is attend to language: they notice new items and familiar items used in new ways. They may pause, notice the form and surrounding words and patterns. They make inferences about meaning and grammar. Perhaps they fit the item into a semantic or syntactic category. Just by becoming more conscious of and familiar with vocabulary, expressions, and patterns which they already recognize and understand, most students are able to increase their expressive means—the language available to them for productive use—quite rapidly. Much of this mental behavior is below the level of conscious intention—rather the language learning mind seeking data. Since the students have to do most of the work of increasing their language resources on their own, their only hope is to get better at it.

With guidance and encouragement from their instructors, ESL students can become more deliberate and skillful in acquiring language from the tasks and contexts in which they encounter it. The idea that students can become more deliberate and skillful language learners relies on certain language learning principles—namely that the level of attention to language and the strength of motivation to improve strongly influence whether or not students acquire new language. Attention and motivation have extremely powerful effects in the language-learning mind. Occasionally, motivated learners seem almost able to reinvoke the language-learning abilities of the child—whose attention and motivation drive an incredible language-learning capacity. As we know, adults lose a great deal of this capacity, but adult students with motivation and awareness of language are awfully good at learning large amounts of language on their own.

The model of language learning called grammatical consciousness raising, proposed by William Rutherford and others (Rutherford; Rutherford and Smith) supports the idea that attention to language is necessary in order for acquisition to occur. Like most second language acquisition theorists, they propose that acquisition occurs when the language learning mind takes in elements of the language in a specifically linguistic mode. Our minds seem to "pick up" elements of language by being exposed to them over and over, and eventually we find that we know them and can use them for communication. The mind has its own way of identifying, sorting, and internalizing linguistic data. The kind of

memorization and conceptual learning necessary in most academic subjects is not sufficient, sometimes not even helpful, in learning a language. For example, a conceptual understanding of the use of tenses in English rarely leads to native-like tense usage, whereas over time, the linguistic mind is able to sort out distinctions and criteria that can lead to native-like production. In this linguistic model of acquisition, language instruction as such, for instance in a traditional language class, simply has the effect of raising the learner's grammatical consciousness so that the mind will take in the material more readily as linguistic input; paradigms and demonstrations raise learners' awareness of the properties of the language in a way that facilitates the language learning mind in incorporating the new material--selectively and over time, depending on what the learner's mind is ready to internalize. The necessary criterion is that the learner notice the items, where "notice" indicates a continuum of meanings: the item might catch the learner's fleeting attention or she might dwell on it, pondering its meaning, usage, or grammatical properties. The new items find a place in the learner's mental grammar or mental lexicon and over time, with repeated noticing, the mind becomes sufficiently familiar with the new items that they will be acquired--at first only for recognition, then eventually for production in speech and writing. Recent research in incidental vocabulary acquisition has continued to find that some degree of conscious attention is an important variable (Ellis; Parry; Robinson; and Schmidt).

Approaches for Working with ESL Students

To address the language needs of second-language students, instructors can encourage them to take advantage of their language-learning abilities and provide them with means to develop greater attentiveness to language. The approach I will describe is grounded in principles of language learning and at the same time compatible with most instructors' course goals and pedagogy-- not an added ESL unit for particular students in the class. Instructors can help their ESL students to become better language learners by using the contexts of the course reading and writing to develop the kind of heightened language awareness which is likely to lead to greater acquisition. The language of the students' reading, writing, and speech environments serves as sources of language input. The instructors' role is to facilitate the incidental and natural language learning that students are already engaged in by helping them to become aware of the way they learn language from the language contexts they encounter and by encouraging them to pursue more deliberately the task of learning from such contexts. This section will describe in more

detail several approaches that take advantage of students' natural language learning abilities and that can empower them to use these abilities more fully and efficiently.

But before going into more detail about these methods, perhaps I should make clear that it is usually not good practice to address a student's language issues first thing. Instructors would do better to start with a more holistic approach, introducing the principle of attention to language along the way. The principle and practice of attention to language can be embedded into the more holistic modes of working with the student (#1 and #2 below). These pedagogical approaches break down roughly into three types:

1. Talking with the student about what he or she is experiencing as a writer and student in the class;
2. Commenting on papers in ways that attempt to see into the student's intentions and to facilitate those intentions--in other words using commenting fully as an opportunity to explain, to fill in the gaps in the student's knowledge and experience; and
3. In class activities, in conferences, and in essay comments, encouraging the student to attend to language as a means of promoting acquisition. Guiding the student to build good language learning strategies and habits on her own.

Pedagogical Approach #1--Talking with students

Instructors can adopt simple pedagogical approaches which will, in the end, make their teaching easier and more rewarding. Instructors can spend some time getting to know their ESL students and letting the students tell them where and how they are struggling. Instructors come to have a much fuller understanding of ESL students by just giving them the opportunity to tell their stories. The students may relate tales of frustration at not being able to say what they mean or of excruciating writer's block. Or they may divulge that they simply don't get what an American reader expects in an essay, or that the expectations as they understand them are very different from those in their native culture. Or perhaps students will pinpoint areas of grammar that they have always been confused about. Almost all ESL students readily point to a lack of adequate vocabulary as a large problem. Most instructors who consult with their ESL students in this way, and who ask them what kind of teaching and feedback would help them, learn to take their needs into consideration and work with them more appropriately and comfortably than they might have had they not taken the time to understand them. And they get a bonus--these students are among the

most interesting to know and to teach as well as usually very appreciative of a teacher's efforts to help.

Pedagogical Approach #2--Facilitative reading and commenting

Another general pedagogical principle instructors can put into practice is facilitative reading and commenting on student writing. This kind of reading draws on the understanding approach to students' struggles. It simply entails assuming that the student has intentions for her writing but is not skillful enough or does not have the expressive means to achieve them. In facilitative commenting, the instructor attempts to understand the student's intention, whether it is on the level of a word, a sentence, a stretch of text, or the whole essay, and makes comments and suggestions that help the student to realize those intentions--in other words commenting that teaches. It provides solutions and alternatives at just those points where the student can learn how to express an idea or what the reader needs to follow the argument.

For second language students, facilitative commenting often takes the form of guidance in reader expectations, not only by giving examples of solutions to their writing problems but also by providing a rationale for changes. Non-native students may not have had much experience reading or writing academic essays in English, much less essays in a particular discipline. They may come from cultures in which writing proceeds differently--often without the "top-down" and focused argument that we have come to expect. We may be fascinated by the differences in rhetorical expectations of formal writing in the various cultures from which our ESL students come, but we sometimes fail to reflect on our own rhetorical expectations as artifacts of our culture, in particular our academic and disciplinary culture. We help ESL students, as well as native English-speaking students, by making our expectations at certain points in the writing explicit, saying something like, "The material you include is all potentially relevant, but the reader expects you to remind her directly of the connections to the point you are making. In this writing tradition, the reader expects you to keep showing how your ideas are relevant to the point you are making, rather than letting the reader find these connections. The reader gets frustrated if she can't easily follow how each part of the essay is connected." In some cultures, among them Japanese, the writer is not expected to be as responsible for writing in the logical links, and the reader does more work. But the English tradition puts more responsibility on the writer and less on the reader. For students who lack a sense of what needs to be said and when, facilitative

comments on their essays give them not only suggestions and guidance for expressing their intentions but also insight into what may be to them the expectations of a foreign culture.

It may be helpful for instructors simply to anticipate that a student could be proceeding from a quite different sense of what constitutes exposition or argument--especially as regards what to include, in what order, and how directly. Since it is usually very hard to tell whether a student is drawing on her native writing traditions, it is usually enough for the instructor to recognize his own expectations and needs as a reader and to make these available to the student in the context of her writing. Instructors come to realize that they themselves have much to learn about the shape and conventions of the discourse in their disciplines, which they have somehow mastered without much recourse to the terms and concepts used to talk about and teach writing. They usually enter into this realm with interest, realizing that they will understand their own writing more fully as they learn to explain their expectations better to their students.

Pedagogical Approach #3--Helping students to develop language awareness

So far in this section, I have discussed pedagogical approaches in general--which may or may not include working on language. The rest of this section offers more specific guidance in helping students to increase their language resources by calling attention to language in the context of course texts and student papers and by preparing individual students to pursue language development using language awareness techniques. Instructors can encourage this awareness by incorporating attention to language into their classroom discussion and comments on papers, orienting some of their teaching practices more towards language. Any classroom work discussing the effect of language use, comparing styles, or analyzing sentence structure focuses students' attention on language. Or instructors may decide to work with individual students one-on-one to introduce specific techniques for developing their language on their own. I will discuss, first, ways for encouraging awareness by incorporating attention to language into the instructor's commenting practices and then ways for introducing language awareness techniques to individual students. The pedagogical principle in both cases is the same: Encourage the students to notice items of language and to build their own habit of language awareness.

But first, a caveat. It is important that the instructor's attitude toward and attention to language become a facilitative process rather than a punitive one in which the student feels she is called to account and judged negatively for her missteps in language use. Strong exhortation to improve doesn't discourage the student, especially when she

understands that the instructor has a pedagogical purpose in calling attention to language issues. On the other hand, the student's perception that the instructor is simply reacting to her "bad" English causes the student to dislike and avoid this painful endeavor of writing in English--not a situation in which much language learning can occur. When we as instructors think back on the productive experiences we have had in acquiring proficiency in another language, we usually recall environments in which we felt successful and encouraged by our newfound expressive means. Positive experiences fueled our enthusiasm while a focus on our errors inhibited us and made us fearful to expose our lack of expertise. Of course, these are self-evident pedagogical principles; in language learning, where making errors is an unavoidable part of the process, the instructor's or interlocutor's attitude toward and treatment of error plays an important part in establishing a productive learning context. An understanding between the student and instructor about the purposes of attention to language thus shape the context within which the instructor's comments can be better understood and used.

∞ Encouraging Language Awareness: In the Context of Commenting on Papers

In commenting on papers, what specific methods might constitute "drawing attention to language"? I suggest that instructors call attention to items in such a way that students can learn from the corrections or changes. The student should be able to identify the item for which an alternative is being offered and to perceive the basis for the correction--even if she can't exactly understand why. To take the most obvious example of an unproductive comment, consider the notation "awk." It provides no indication about the location and nature of the language problem and thus no way for the student to learn from it--except to try somehow not to write awkward sentences in the future. Even a stretch of text that has been rephrased by the instructor will probably not give the student a clear notion of the instructor's objection--unless he explains his purpose. However, with such an explanation, good examples of sentence restructuring can be very useful. Students can learn from examples of preferred versions if they know the principle according to which it is preferred. At the level of style and phrasing, they need both examples and elucidating principles.

At the level of usage and expressions, a student can learn from two contrasting examples that seem to be confused. For example, if the student has written, "He has advantage of..." it would help her untangle the items by simply writing "take advantage of someone" and "have an advantage over someone," and indicate which one the student seems to intend. Of course, explaining meanings may be helpful, but is not always necessary. Students often know the distinct meanings of terms they have confused when

they see them side by side. For word choice issues, when a student has not been able to locate the appropriate word, simply offering it often leads the student to respond with "Oh yeah, that's the word I was looking for." Selective and clear alternatives and contrasting examples of usage constitute good input to language learning just at the points where the student is ready to focus on them; they are salient--a criterion for easily learnable language items. While most instructors correct items for students, they don't always do so in ways that help the student learn. The approach here shifts the emphasis to a more deliberate pedagogic purpose, providing input that allows the student to learn the items and also providing practice in language awareness in the context of their writing.

Students can also become more aware of language if instructors shift the purpose of editing from that of producing error-free documents to that of enhancing the students' awareness of their own untapped knowledge of English. Editing entails accessing and listening carefully to what "sounds right," to their linguistic intuitions at whatever stage of development these intuitions may be. While some students have not yet developed reliable intuitions, especially students who have recently arrived in this country and have not had extensive experience hearing and speaking English, many have a good "inner ear" for English grammar and usage but are not adept at accessing it. If they learn to reread their work by reading very slowly out loud, they are able to catch grammar errors, discover missing or wrong words, or untangle syntax. They need to be shown how to do this and cajoled into realizing that they have much more knowledge of the language than they are using; they have untapped linguistic resources. It's a problem of access to their still developing "mental grammar." As they gain confidence that they have this miraculous knowledge that they aren't even aware of, they learn to listen to it, to test out how their expressions and sentences sound, and to try to fill in the gaps where they aren't sure. Once a student's mind is engaged in this way, something else miraculous often kicks in: her mind goes to work on the problems she has set--picking up the new bits of knowledge she is looking for, sorting out various hypotheses, creating paradigms and patterns. This is what the language learning mind does to create a full linguistic system. It's as if the student's motivation, along with her increased awareness of language, prompts the language learning apparatus to start working at full capacity.

To encourage the student to edit in this way (after working with the student in conference to show her the process), the instructor can mark a near-final draft for editing in a way that prompts the student to attend carefully to a limited section of text, searching her linguistic store for "what sounds right." The instructor can indicate with a mark of some sort at the end of a line that there is an error that the student should be able to find by reading out loud and listening carefully. The instructor might give hints as to what kind of

error it is, or might even mark the spot if he thinks the student will have trouble finding the problem but will be able to fix it if the location is indicated. Not all ESL students need to focus on local errors, but those who have difficulty accessing the real knowledge they have in their minds can use this process to put what they know to use. It amazes me how much they enjoy this task; my students ask me to mark their papers for editing. It's a game which challenges them to find the answers in their own linguistic store.

∞ Encouraging Language Awareness: Students Working on Their Own

To prepare students to develop language awareness on their own, instructors can use specific methods, a sampling of which I describe below. They should explain and demonstrate them to individual students--usually only one or two in any class. The instructors' role is to help the students understand the process of language learning that they are involved in, convince them that they can learn a great deal of new language if they want to, and provide means by which they can become more attentive language learners. I suggest that the instructor first discuss with the student her need for more vocabulary and expressions, sentence development, or error correction. The instructor can help the student realize how her language learning proceeds, usually at a rather low level of awareness, and how that process can be facilitated by her becoming more deliberately aware of how certain elements of language sound, how they go together with others, how they function, or what they mean. The student's job is to make a concerted effort to attend to language and develop a habit of noticing. The tasks I provide focus on elements of language; the instructor introduces the tasks, and the student can use them on their own. The tasks give the student a way of focusing her attention on language by asking her to look for specific categories of items in a text--such as the types of verbs which are often or obligatorily followed by particular patterns. In finding these elements, the student practices attending deliberately to language items in short sections of text. The materials I provide address students directly and include explanations of how they are learning language and how they can facilitate the process by deliberately becoming more attentive to language. Instructors can use the materials to remind themselves of what they might say to the student about language learning and then pass them on to the student. The student chooses the texts she will use for noticing; they may be ones that she is reading in her First-Year Writing Seminar or general interest reading materials.

Here is an example of an exercise, one designed to help students improve their active vocabulary by noticing words that they are more or less familiar with but which they have never used themselves. The exercise follows a page and a half of explanation about how they learn vocabulary:

Time per day: 15 minutes. (This time can be spread out over the day. You could fit it in in little spaces of time while you wait for a class or an appointment. If you get your mind in the habit of "noticing," it will turn to it every time it has a chance.)

Materials: Any piece of reading that you have already read and understood. The reading could be something you have read for your Writing Seminar or just a piece that interested you.

Procedure: First, read over one paragraph, reminding yourself of what it is about. Then find words and expressions (a group of words that seem to go together) that you already know the meaning of but have probably never used. Go through the paragraph underlining words of this type. Now go back and make a list of them. Make a list of 20-25 words a day--at least 150 a week.

If you see the same word or expression several times, you can write it in your list again; it will simply become more familiar to you. The point is to deliberately pay attention to words in your reading. By picking out words and writing them down, you will be building your familiarity with them and you will be more likely to have them available to you for your own use. (You might circle words that you encounter for the first time; if you look them up or can guess the meaning, you can write them in your list.) While you are doing this exercise, you will also notice other elements of language. Slow down and notice.

The process of noticing each word or expression as an item of language, pausing a moment to ponder whether or not she has used it herself, and either going on or underlining it allows the kind of attention that will speed up acquisition of the items. Students who have a great deal of passive vocabulary find that doing this exercise dramatically improves their ability to find the words they need as they are writing. Again, the language learning mind seems to respond to students' motivation and to tasks the student sets for it.

A series of other exercises asks students to use texts to notice various kinds of items: for instance to locate verbs that seem to be followed by patterns attached to the verb, to locate tense shifts and notice the transitions which allow the writer to move from one cluster of tenses to the other (past to present or present to past), to locate present tense verbs with an -s ending and then find the subject, to locate nouns and notice what precedes them--in particular whether or not there is an article, to find prepositions and figure out what word determines the use of each, to find various types of clauses (if the student has such sentence knowledge), or to find sentences that they like and would like to imitate. In the exercise handout, I often explain the language issue to the student and always give examples. But the student chooses the materials she will work with and lets her mind move to the items that she (or it) finds interesting or problematic. Letting the language-learning mind pursue its course is very important, especially when the language knowledge and

experience of ESL students is so diverse. I seldom recommend that an instructor give his students textbook ESL exercises to do; they are usually at too general or simplistic a level. I do, however, occasionally refer instructors to ESL grammar texts which will help the student conceptualize a grammar topic that confuses her, and the student can do the accompanying exercises if she wants to practice.

One situation in which I might recommend exercises would be for a student who cannot locate the subject of sentences in order to make the verb agree with it. But for the most part students are struggling to master the complexities of real language use and the only way to learn that is by becoming familiar with the language in the types of writing they would like to emulate. Most ESL students know they need to learn more language in a hurry. This awareness approach gives them specific things to do that help them become more efficient language learners.

For Further Guidance

I hope that I have provided here some useful guidance for addressing students' language issues. As you work with second-language students in your seminars, you can refer to my manual for instructors "Second-Language Students in the Writing Class" for a more in-depth treatment. The manual elaborates on the various kinds of language problems you may see in your students' papers, providing examples and possible ways of treating them. In the Appendix, you will find a variety of noticing exercises to help students learn language on their own. The manual also suggests how to proceed early in the semester as you are determining whether or not a second-language student will be able to handle your course. At any time during the semester, but most usefully early, I am available to meet with instructors to discuss individual students in their classes. In such a session, we might try to understand more precisely the problems the student is having—aspects of the language, or writing more generally, that she is struggling with. I can suggest approaches for working with the student and provide materials. With some help sorting out the issues and a few pointers, an instructor should find the semester's work with a second-language student more pedagogically-grounded and productive.

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