

The BYU RWC Presents...

Working with Multilingual Students

A Brief Guide

As an instructor, TA, or writing consultant/tutor, you'll no doubt be working with students from a variety of backgrounds. Some of your students will have grown up immersed in the academic registers of English. They will have had college-educated parents, high school teachers who pushed them to achieve highly, and siblings and friends who helped ease them into university life. On the other hand, some of your students will be first-generation college students, unfamiliar with how this whole university thing works. Some will have come from high school programs where academics weren't emphasized very deeply. Some will speak English as a second language and may have learned very different academic styles and conventions in their first language. Some will be bilingual and speak a language other than English at home.

Students from this wide range of backgrounds will likely come to your class with drastically varied levels of writing preparedness. Some will struggle intensely with English academic writing, not for lack of intelligence or hard work but simply because their past experiences with writing and language don't align with the "norms" of academic English. So what can you do to help this diverse set of students succeed in writing? Here are a few key suggestions:

1. Understand where your students are coming from

It can be easy to assume that all students possess the same set of academic skills simply by virtue of having gotten into BYU. Knowing that this is not the case is the first step towards providing equitable opportunities for the student writers in your class.

When it comes to differences in language and writing background in particular, it's important to remember that the common binary labels of "native speaker" vs. "international ESL student" present an oversimplified picture. As described above, students' language backgrounds can be very complex. It's also important to remember that students view their own identities differently: while some students embrace labels like "ESL student" or "second-language writer", others find such labels stigmatizing or alienating. In order to cast a wide net that reaches many types of students without stigmatizing them, we recommend using the term **multilingual students** rather than ESL, second-language, or non-native English-speaking students.

Multilingual Student: *A student from a language background more complex than just "native English speaker." Some multilingual students have no obvious external characteristics, such as a foreign accent, to "mark" them as multilingual.*

To learn more about students' diverse experiences and providing students with equitable opportunities, we recommend this TED Talk by Anthony Jack:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j7w2Gv7ueOc>

2. View students from an additive rather than a deficit perspective

How you perceive your students can subtly influence your attitudes towards them, how you treat them, and how effective you can be at helping them. That's why we recommend viewing your students from an additive rather than a deficit perspective.

A Deficit Perspective:

Putting students' weaknesses front and center in your view of them. Making assumptions about the underlying meaning of these weaknesses. Stressing out about students' weaknesses and differences.

An Additive Perspective:

Putting students' strengths front and center in your view of them. Avoiding assumptions about the underlying meaning of students' weaknesses. Realizing that differences are not inherently weaknesses. Celebrating students' differences and feeling excited to support students.

Here are some specific examples of deficit vs. additive views about multilingual students:

D: This student is just so bad at writing!

A: This student, like all students, is a developing writer in the process of improving.

D: This student's grammar is terrible. Did they even proofread this paper?

A: This student may not have followed the grammar conventions of standard academic English, but their paper is still easy to understand and their ideas are well thought out.

D: I dislike working with multilingual students. Their papers just have so many problems, and I don't know how to help them fix everything!

A: I love working with multilingual students. They bring unique perspectives to everything they do and I can learn a lot from them. I don't have to stress because it's not my job to help them fix *everything* -- just to help them choose one or two areas of improvement to focus on now.

3. Recognize common patterns in multilingual students' writing and experiences

While each multilingual writer is unique, it can be helpful to recognize some patterns and writing characteristics that many have in common. Here are just a few to keep in mind:

A. Lack of intuition about academic conventions

It can take many years for students to build an intuitive sense about whether their writing “works,” fits a certain genre or academic convention, or sounds “right” grammatically. Many multilingual writers have not yet had the time to build this intuition.

When working with such writers, be careful not to put them on the spot by blindly asking things like, “Does this sound right to you?”, “What do *you* think is wrong with this sentence?”, “How would *you* fix this grammar error?” etc. Instead, help fill the students’ knowledge gaps through explanation and suggestion.

B. Differences in learned academic conventions

Students from certain language and academic backgrounds, especially those raised outside the US, may have learned to do writing very differently from how we tend to do it at US universities. The academic traditions of some cultures teach students to be flowery and roundabout in their writing, while others teach them to be direct and blunt. Some academic traditions teach students to state their thesis up front, while others teach them to save their main point for the end of the paper. Some academic traditions teach students to be as clear as possible, while others teach them to be vague, putting the onus for making sense of the paper onto the reader.

The main point for you to take away from all this: No one writing system is inherently better or more logical than another. There are many, many valid ways to approach writing; just because students write differently than you expect them to doesn’t necessarily mean they’re not following a logical pattern. At the same time, it is important to help students learn the conventions of US academic writing, since that’s what will be expected of them in their present setting. Wonderfully, you are in a prime position to do just that!

C. Grammar, wording, and punctuation errors

When it comes to grammar, wording, and punctuation, it’s no secret that multilingual writers often make more errors than their native-speaking counterparts. Depending on your own feelings about grammar, you may feel inclined to help your students scrub their papers of every last error. While this is an understandable feeling, it’s not necessarily realistic or desirable. More important than eliminating every student error is helping the student get better at fixing their own errors over time. (This is sort of a “teach a man to fish...” thing.)

When helping students with grammar and related errors, we recommend following these steps:

- a. Look for patterns in your student's paper. Is there a certain error they make over and over again? Or errors that are throwing off your ability, as a reader, to understand the paper?
- b. Choose 1-2 (3 max) types of errors you'd like to help your student focus on in this paper. When deciding what to choose, prioritize errors that affect readers' ability to follow or comprehend paper over those that don't. Also prioritize errors that can be explained (e.g., verb conjugations) over ones that are too random or arbitrary to explain (e.g., prepositions).
- c. Point out the errors to the student and teach them how to fix them. (If needed, you can briefly Google the rule or explanation yourself before explaining it to the student or sharing the resource with them.) Feel free to give the student some examples and/or help them fix the first few instances.
- d. Sometimes errors compound on errors to create a mess that's very difficult to parse out or explain. If certain places in the student's paper are especially problematic, point these out to the student. Explain that you are confused and work with the student to re-word the sentence or passage into something that works better. *You don't necessarily have to identify or explain everything that's wrong with the passage to help the student make it better.*

4. Refer students to focused writing help

Our consultants at the RWC are always ready and willing to help your students work on their writing. Students can visit the RWC at any time and for any reason -- we are here to help at any stage of the writing process. There's a common misconception that students can only visit the RWC once they have a good draft of their paper to revise -- THIS IS NOT THE CASE! Students can come to us to brainstorm, talk through their ideas, get help understanding a prompt or assignment, create an outline, get started, or revise existing writing. Consultants can even help students with reading strategies and understanding their reading assignments. Please feel free to send students in need of writing help to us!

For multilingual students specifically:

We are also piloting a new program this semester, the Writing Tutorial for Multilingual Students, to offer even more focused support to students who fall under the multilingual umbrella. Students who sign up for the Tutorial will be paired with an RWC consultant who will meet with them weekly throughout the whole semester, helping them set and achieve writing-related goals. Here are some materials to help you understand more about the Writing Tutorial. Please share these with your students! And, if you have a specific student who you think would be a good fit for the Tutorial, feel free to refer them to us at any point in the semester.

Additional Resources:

Here's a great two-part video that can help you learn more about the experiences of multilingual student writers in their own words. (The two parts together are about 30 minutes long -- if you don't have that much time, feel free to just watch a selection from the videos.):

Writing Across Borders, Part I: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cv3uRPsskv0>

Writing Across Borders, Part II: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vabyE1a2I7E>