Grading Multilingual Students' Papers: What Are the Issues?

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(see also *Grading Multilingual Students' Papers: A Practical Guide)*

1. *First of all, how do we define "Multilingual/ ESL/ ELL/ L2?" The students we label in these ways might well ask:*

- **Should I be called an ESL student if I came to Canada at the age of 5, or 15, or 25? I would have a different way of learning language in each of these cases.** And what about the fact that English is actually my third or fourth language? Can I be called an ESL or second-language student if I was born in Toronto but have spent my life primarily among friends and family conversing in another language—I have difficulty with English because I use it in school and almost nowhere else?

- **And what if I'm the first member of my family to attend university?** What if I have difficulty with academic language because, even as a native speaker from a native-speaking family, I wasn't exposed to books or analytical conversation throughout my childhood? Or what if I'm very good at math and science and have always had difficulty with English?

- **Why is my friend considered "ESL" and I'm not, when we both came from the same country at the same age?** He comes from a family who did not have many educational opportunities, but I was sent to the best schools back home. Instructors never even realize my mistakes come from my second-language background.

2. *What about issues of equity? As an instructor, I don't want to feel that I'm discriminating…*

- **In order to be fair, it may be best not to focus on "tagging" students as "ESL," but to recognize that second-language (L2) students tend to have many instances of the same kinds of language difficulties anyone else can have.** If you feel sympathetic to a student who has just come here from another country and you're tempted to "go easy" on that student's grade, you may wish to ask yourself if you are extending the same sympathy and privileges to students from Canada who may have a lower level of language acquisition for personal, social, or economic reasons that were beyond their control. You may also want to explore to what extent you can assume that students educated in Canada have been taught the academic uses of English.

- **It's questionable whether seeing a student as "L2" or "ESL" should influence the grade you choose to give that student, though it may well influence teaching.** If programs were to give special consideration to grading work by students with an ESL label, they would need to have a precise definition of the label. However, in terms of teaching (and grading/ commenting on papers is a form of teaching!), the category can be significant. For example, you can then understand that students may be writing in the patterns taken from another language; that they may welcome a grammatical explanation; and that they may be very good at languages but just haven't yet attained the level they'll need at this university. They may also be unfamiliar with the way academic paragraphs and essays are commonly structured in English. (Note: native speakers often don't know the grammar of their own language and won't necessarily relate to grammatical corrections or explanations).

3. What is the range of grading practices at U of T?

- **Some professors/ TAs choose to ignore language errors to a large extent and focus primarily on content.**Others will take down the grade significantly for severe or distracting language errors, no matter the quality of the ideas.My own views tend to fall somewhere in the middle.For example, I might give a paper that displays excellent thinking but a fair number of serious language errors a grade in the B range.With only a few language errors, I could give it an A or A-.

- **You needn't feel pressured into not taking language into consideration or into feeling that it is less important than content.**The language of instruction at U of T is English, and there is a logical justification for the highest marks being reserved for those who can communicate their ideas effectively in English.*It's helpful to see language learning as a long process, and it's important to keep the student's location in this process in perspective.*In other words, students are mostly all capable of attaining a high level of English, but some students will need years to improve their skills.On the other hand, their skills are likely to take a dramatic jump during their immersion in English at UofT.Grading can reflect this view of language acquisition as a process by neither ignoring language nor being overly pedantic about it.Some people also point out that it's not good for programs or students at UofT if graduates with extremely high GPA's are later discovered by their employers to have unsatisfactory communication skills.

4. What kinds of written responses should I give on papers that have many language errors?

- **Many markers make a distinction between errors that obscure meaning and those that don't**. Also, look at the number of errors and their severity.It can be helpful to ask yourself:how many times are you stopped while reading this paper?How many times do you need to debate with yourself the student's exact meaning or intention? If the answer is "frequently," the paper may deserve a lower grade.

- **There is evidence that naming or actually correcting grammatical errors has little additional impact and that circling or underlining errors just to point out their location is sufficient.**However, some students have learned English according to grammatical structures and will appreciate being given the term, particularly for an error they make frequently, e.g. subject-verb agreement, modifier error, etc.

- **If you do correct intensively on a paper with many language errors, try doing it just on one or two paragraphs.** You can then tell the student that these problems repeat in subsequent paragraphs.Students often appreciate being told which types of errors they make most frequently.Rewriting one or two sentences can be valuable, but you likely don't have time to do more than that, and not all students appreciate this technique.

- **As part of the process of assessment, look at how ambitious the student is—what type of language or argument is this student trying to reproduce?** Students may make more errors because they're aiming at more sophisticated sentences or concepts, and you may wish to take this into considerationin your marking.

- **Make sure that no matter how many errors the paper contains, you are still responding to the student's ideas in your comments.** The "discussion" aspect of comments from an instructor can be of the greatest benefit in terms of helping the student move ahead with language learning, so don't get lost in pinpointing errors.

- **Comment on the "higher-order" elements in the paper.** As with any student work, comment on organization, development of ideas, and selection of details. Talk beforehand with other graders in your course to ensure you all use terms like those with the same meaning, and give those elements similar weight.

5. *How do cultural differences affect students' papers?*

- **Unfamiliarity with critical thinking may impact a paper more severely than language errors.**Try to model critical thinking in your comments by asking questions they should have answered.In other words:"Here are some critical questions you can ask yourself about this text/issue.They would lead to a more thorough exploration than you've given here."Model this type of thinking/ discussion in the tutorial or lecture.

- **Cultural differences may affect organization.** Papers may be indirect, building up to their point at the end of a paragraph or building up to the thesis at the end of the paper.Try to reserve judgement as you're reading until you see what the full idea is—you may be surprised.Then try to **explain to the student that the style should be more direct— beginning paragraphs with topic sentences that form the backbone of the argument is most common in academic papers written in English**, and students can observe this by looking at the readings for the course.

- **The student may also lack some background information that was needed for successful completion of this assignment.** He or she may not have been aware of some of these gaps, so you can help by identifying what the student needs to know and pointing out some useful resources for future work. Help students by mentioning appropriate online encyclopedias as alternatives to Wikipedia. These are often listed in the Library Resources tab of course Blackboard sites.

6. *What other issues may impact the quality of amultilingualstudent's paper?*

- **A paper that lacks adequate transitions between thoughts can seem more disorganized or simplistic than it actually is.** Try to discern whether the problem is a lack of complexity in the ideas, or whether the student is actually just missing some of the connective material that shows the relationships between concepts. Some students need to learn the importance of articulating these relationships explicitly and can best be helped by your modeling examples or by a Writing Centre session focused on transitions. (Note: by transitions I mean connectors such as "however" and "thus," but I would also include transitional, pivotal, or summing-up statements that are original to that writer and that rhetorical situation, e.g. "The evidence consistently shows that A exerted a powerful influence on the final outcome of B").

- **Students may find it challenging to achieve an appropriate register in their writing.** Startlingly faulty diction can result when informal language is confused with formal language, or vice versa. Thus even a few unfortunate word choices can strongly influence a grader's perception of a particular paper. This problem may be compounded when an assignment requires students to analyze a text written in colloquial language.

- **Students may be having trouble understanding the reading. Signs of this include vague expression and confused logic.** In this case, no amount of focus on writing will help, as students need strategies for improving reading comprehension. These can be worked into other lessons during tutorials, particularly if an article is being discussed. For teaching ideas, see the Faculty advice file "Teaching Reading Comprehension Strategies." The Academic

Success Centre offers group workshops and individual consultation on reading course materials; writing centres can also help students develop reading skills for writing.

7. *How can I foster success and prevent failure among L2 students?*

- **You can offer a course policy allowing revision, which can be of enormous benefit to L2 students and others as well.** You can also offer a rough draft appraisal, though both these options are time-consuming and may not be realistic for you.Revision focussed solely on language errors will be only moderately successful in many cases, and students may even make the paper worse than it was.With practice you can look very quickly at a draft and give the student valuable direction that will often prevent a failure (e.g. if the draft shows no evidence of critical thinking).You can also spot those who need more individualized instruction in writing and send them to their Writing Centre.

- **It may be wise to grade holistically whenever possible, looking at language and content together as one product, and seeing how the flaws in each may be "balanced" by other qualities.**In other words, you can allow a particularly creative thought and perceptive absorption of the course material to overcome some language errors in your assessment.A detailed descriptive chart giving the requirements for each grade can show students how they're being marked while enabling you to maintain some flexibility of interpretation. However, holistic grading is increasingly being replaced by rubrics with separate point systems for organization, content, originality, and language.Be aware that rubrics can box instructors into giving low marks, as each section has only so many points and thus adjusting the relative weights is not possible. Their advantage is that students see grading as more objective, and the grading policy can seem more transparent and less arbitrary.

Useful Links:

- The Faculty section of the website *Writing at the University of Toronto* (www.writing.utoronto.ca/faculty) containsmany valuable advice files on aspects of teaching writing, including assignment design and commenting on student work.

- The ELL group of Faculty files focusses on helping English Language Learners; it includes files on adapting classroom practices, integrating reading instruction, and grading efficiently.

- Arts and Science undergraduates can visit http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/current/advising/ellfor updates on English Language Learning activities for Arts and Science undergraduates. They will find information on the ELL summer course, a view of sample Communication Cafés, and detailed advice files offering strategies for academic writing and reading.

- All multilingual students can find further resources on the page http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/faqs/english-as-second-language. It sets out an annotated list of other campus programs (including longstanding ones at UTSC, SGS and the Centre for International Experience) and provides links to relevant books and online resources.