

CROSS THE “i,” DOT THE “t”

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Abstract

This short study of the writing assistance colleges and universities give international students provided sufficient information to warrant additional research. As expected, former students who returned to their countries of origin were less articulate than were those who pursued careers or enrolled in graduate school in the US. The oldest participant who remained in the US had the most developed language skills, while the oldest participant who returned to the country of origin had the least developed language skills. Participants who are current graduate students were more inclined to “think in English” than were former students who repatriated.

The following brief summary reflects suggestions for improvement from study participants. In all cases, *attention to individual concerns* and *feedback* are essential to successful experience. International students who speak English as a second language recommended the following improvements: (a) voluntary, specialization-based mentoring partnerships and study groups; (b) institution-paid professional tutors, ESL interns, or graduate student assistants; (c) culturally aware advisors and faculty; (d) a mandated writing course based on department philosophy, and expectations for student goals, major papers, and journal articles; and (e) a staff person to assist with writing major papers.

Introduction: What Does Experience Tell Us?

During my doctoral studies, I was one of 10 women in an informal study group; five of my peers were international students from Bahrain (1), Puerto Rico (1), Thailand (1), and Taiwan (2). As a former English teacher, I became the “authority” on all questions concerning the English language, especially questions about writing the doctoral dissertation. As one of the women and I worked together to edit her final draft, suddenly, she pushed away from the computer, looked at me with frustration, and exclaimed, “*Sometimes I am even confused about how to cross the i and dot the t!*” Since she was arguably the most intellectual and conscientious member of our group, her statement first startled me, then made me laugh, and finally, forced me to realize what a huge task she had undertaken when she came to the United States to study and learn a second language well enough to earn a doctorate from a major university. The fact that I was her “human dictionary” reinforced my budding notion that *colleges and universities do not adequately prepare their graduate students to write successful theses and dissertations.*

In my admittedly limited experience, international college and university students who are non-native English language speakers generally have great respect for education, high intellectual levels, tremendous enthusiasm, and an unquenchable desire to learn. Even those qualities, however, cannot solve all the problems inherent in academic expectations for the graduate-level papers these students must write. Beginning with their first graduate course, international students write papers in virtually every class and conclude their academic careers with either a thesis or doctoral dissertation that is generally expected to be comparable to those of graduate students to whom English is a native language.

Although I am not an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher, this situation concerns me as an adult educator who works informally with international students to improve writing skills, and edits graduate papers, theses, and dissertations for both international and native-US students. It should also concern faculty members and administrators of colleges and universities whose graduate students compose course papers, theses, and dissertations that are less than well written due to a lack of practical and/or affordable writing assistance.

Most college graduates are unaware of the impact theses and dissertations from “their” college or university have on other people. While most of us have at least one bound copy of our “Big D” or other terminal writing accomplishment, we never really know how often other graduate students, faculty members, researchers, and other interested individuals request those documents from the degree-granting college or university for research or other purposes. When requested works are written poorly, albeit with great passion and sincerity, the degree-granting college or university suffers by comparison to other institutions that better prepare their graduate students—especially those who speak English as a second language—for their major writing tasks.

Why Should We Care?

Many faculty members and graduate assistants spend long hours explaining the subtleties of English language usage to frustrated second language speakers, and most colleges and universities provide a quality education in each student’s field of study. Frequently, however, they do a less thorough job of preparing those students to write well.

Those graduate students who pursue academic careers will likely write numerous articles and even texts, and those who pursue careers in business or industry will write memos, reports, letters, presentation materials, and other business-related documents. When international students lack good writing techniques, they will continue to make—and even teach others to make—mistakes in written communication.

What Do the Experts Tell Us?

Vygotsky’s (1962) theory of *Thought and Language* asserts that, “Thought development is determined by language [and] . . . intellectual growth is contingent on mastering the social means of thought (p. 51). Trimble (1995), agrees that one of the major obstacles faced by non-native students as they prepare for graduate studies is the transition between thinking in their native language and thinking in English, the language in which they must write advanced papers. When such a transition is lacking, she continues, non-native English speakers remain on a learning plateau in respect to language usage and communications skills.

Elbow (1973) maintains that experience must link to thinking, and language is the medium of thought. Elbow’s free writing transition process promotes access to ideas by involving students, who write quickly about whatever comes to mind, without pausing to think about errors in spelling, grammar, language conventions, or style. Non-native English speakers simply express their thoughts about a topic with which they are familiar—in English.

What Assistance Do Institutions—and Student Initiative—Provide?

To their credit, in order to address the writing issues of a growing number of non-native English language speakers, many colleges and universities provide combinations of free, low-cost, and tuition-based assistance. These options help international students meet their academic goals by strengthening their overall use of the English language and enhancing their abilities to communicate effectively in spoken and written English. Notably, the Department of Modern Languages at Carnegie Mellon University (2001) and the University of Arizona (2002) provide extensive individual and group language resources to international students.

Other institutional approaches to student writing assistance include (a) ESL programs, (b) remedial writing courses, (c) college-/university-based tutoring, (d) computer labs and language usage software, and one-on-one assistance from (e) faculty members, (f) advisors, and (g) committee members. At the same time, many international students have resolved the issue with (a) private-pay or volunteer tutors, and generally unpaid assistance from (b) spouse, (c) other relatives, (d) friends, and (e) study group peers. In

addition to personal contact, text and on-line writing sources (University of Arizona, 2002) are available. Unfortunately, many international students still begin the writing process with few prerequisite English language skills and little or no assistance from faculty members, advisors, and committee members.

What Comprises the Study?

As I explained to a native Russian speaker—for at least the third time—the differences between “fell,” “feel,” and “fail,” she reminded me—for at least the third time—that she “*knew the word very well in Russian.*” I realized at that moment what every ESL teacher knows: *there is a difference between knowing how to speak a second language and thinking in that language.*

In response to my newfound curiosity, I created a 10-question, choice-based questionnaire with an “Additional comments” option after each response. I did not attempt to be objective with participant choices; international students with whom I was acquainted received the questionnaire via e-mail. The participants were natives of six countries: Bahrain, Puerto Rico, India, the Russian Republic, Taiwan, and Thailand.

Of the 12 surveys sent, three were marked “undeliverable mail” (Bahrain [1], India [2]) and returned, and two women (Puerto Rico, Thailand) did not respond. However, one respondent each from the Russian Republic and Taiwan gave the questionnaire to friends who “might” provide interesting information. The final study comprised nine former and current students from Taiwan (ROC) (6) and Russia (former USSR) (3), a group that did not provide the diversity for which I had hoped, but did provide numerous insights. Six men and three women, ages 29 to 44, completed the survey. All participants spoke at least their native language and English, and four were trilingual. Chinese (3) or Mandarin Chinese (3), Taiwanese (1), and Russian (3) were first languages; English (9) and Taiwanese (3) were second languages.

Four individual had completed a PhD and one had completed a JD degree. Two students had completed MS or MA degrees, and were, along with two others, “in the process” of completing PhDs. Degrees were awarded from the University of Southern California (1), Hamline University School of Law (1), and the University of Minnesota (7), by four “US residents” and five “international students.” The earliest degree was awarded in 1996, the most recent in 2002. Students completed major writing projects between 1992 and 2002, and four major paper projects were “in the process” of completion.

What Information Did the Questionnaire Provide?

For all questions, participants were asked to “check all [options] that apply,” and were invited to provide “Additional comments.” Participants frequently checked multiple options.

Question 1 asked: *Which long paper(s)/articles did you write or are you writing as a graduate student?* From the list of seven options, participants checked *conference proceedings* (6), *doctoral dissertation* (5), *graduate course papers* (5), *articles for publication* (3), *Masters’ thesis* (2), and *Plan B paper* (1).

Question 2 asked: *Which form(s) of assistance did your college/university or major field department offer to help you write papers?* From the list of eight options, participants checked *ESL course* (3), *college-/university-based tutor* (3), *advisor* (3), *faculty member* (2), *remedial writing course* (1), *private-pay tutor* (1), and *committee member* (1).

Question 3 asked: *At your college/university, which of the following did you approach to ask for help to write major paper(s)/article(s)?* From the list of nine options, participants checked *advisor* (3), *ESL instructor* (2), *college-/university-based tutor* (2), *graduate course instructor* (1), *other faculty* (1), and *other college/university personnel* (friends [2], classmates [2]). *Remedial writing*

instructor and *Director of Graduate Studies* received no checks, and three participants, all Russian, specifically stated that they did not ask for assistance.

Question 4 asked: *Which of the following approaches did you use to help with writing your paper(s)?* From the list of 15 options, participants checked *friend* (7), *study group peer* (4), *private-pay tutor* (5), *college-/university-based tutor* (3), *advisor* (3), *spouse* (3), *faculty member* (2), *college/university writing course* (2), *computer-based writing program* (2), and *community education-based writing course* (1). *Committee member*, *sibling*, *parent*, and *other relative* received no checks, although one participant indicated that he had completed a university-based course for international teaching assistants.

Question 5 asked: *Which type(s) of assistance was/were most helpful to your writing efforts? Why?* Participants cited *face-to-face*, *one-on-one tutorial sessions* (4), *friends* (1), and *study group peers* (1) as being most helpful.

Question 6 asked: *What was most difficult about writing papers in English? What did you do to overcome that problem?* Three participants cited *use of articles (a, an, the)* as most difficult, while *use of prepositions*, *sentence structure*, *vocabulary*, *abstract concepts*, and *language usage* were each mentioned by single participants. One participant stated that, when he began to write his dissertation, he *“did not experience difficulties writing in English.”*

Methods used to overcome the most difficult problems included *“read more”* (2), *“editors/reviewers”* (3), *“try and try again”* (1), *“practice”* (1), and *“check with friends and tutors”* (1). *“Watching movies”* (1) and *“talking with American friends”* (1) were other options.

Question 7 asked: *What was the most helpful concept or “trick” you learned about writing in English? How or from whom did you learn that concept?* Two major concepts—*“follow in the footsteps of those who have succeeded before you”* and *“practice”*—were emphasized by five participants, who cited *“friends,” “my boss,” “writing classes,”* and *“experience”* as the sources of those concepts. One participant responded that *“continuing thinking in English and writing”* were most helpful, concepts she learned from corrections a study group peer made to her papers.

Questions 8 asked: *Now that you have received your degree or have completed several major papers, what do you feel that you needed to learn but were not told about writing major graduate papers in English?* One statement summed up three participants' comments: *“Writing a paper really takes much more time than I expected!”* Others expressed regret that they had not learned *“[professional] journal writing style,” “how to write syntactically [sic] correct sentences,”* and *“to listen and read what other people in the country say and write.”* One participant stated: *“I wish someone would have told me to be more confident in my writing. I spent hours analyzing every word. Instead, it would have been nice to spend that time analyzing the contents.”*

Question 9 asked: *Did you ever pay for writing assistance? If so, what was the cost?* Only two participants paid a private tutor (\$20 per hour) and a professional editor (\$10-\$15 per hour) for writing assistance.

Question 10 asked: *If you could have received any type(s) of assistance with writing major papers in your non-native language, what type(s) would have helped you the most? Please explain.* Six of the participants cited two types of assistance: *face-to-face feedback* by a *“tutor”* (3) and *editing/proofreading* by an *“educated native speaker”* (3). Other requests were for *“courses on general writing skills”* (1), and *“[more] comments on my writing”* (2). One participant, who is now an assistant professor, requested a *“[professional] journal writing course.”*

A final, optional question, asked: *What else would you like to tell me about your experiences writing graduate papers?* One participant, who completed her PhD and has an academic career, said, *“It was a difficult process, but [it] gained [a good] harvest.”* Other participants, who were in the process of working on their terminal degrees, were less confident. *“It is a long, long was to go*

by myself," said one student, while another wrote, "[I don't know] how to choose the sentence and what I should cite [in references to others' work]." Questions from her doctoral committee during her oral preliminary exam confused and frustrated one PhD candidate. She recounted that only through a lengthy discussion did the group "understand what I meant," and cited the differences between the "story-telling" qualities of English and Chinese speakers as a major concern. "Chinese," she wrote, "will explain a matter more [before they reach] the conclusion, but English [speakers] write the [major] point first [then] elaborate [on] the ideas."

Conclusion: What Writing Assistance Should We Provide International Students?

Providing writing assistance for international graduate students should not in any way undermine or usurp the efforts of faculty members, graduate assistants, advisors, and committee members who work with those students to formulate topic, methodology, structure, and context for theses and dissertations. Nor should such responsibility put a heavier burden on dedicated faculty who already spend extra time working with students—both native-speakers and internationals—to improve their writing efforts. The suggestions made by participants in this short study were both straightforward and insightful. The following recommendations reflect their responses to the survey questionnaire, particularly, the "Additional comments" sections and Questions 7, 8, and 10. In all cases, *attention to individual concerns* and *feedback* are essential to successful experience.

1. Create voluntary, specialization-based mentoring partnerships between international students and native-English graduate students in the same department.
2. Create voluntary study groups (10 members maximum, with weekly meetings) that match international students and native-English speakers. The groups could also incorporate mentoring partnerships.
3. Allow two graduate students who have excellent writing skills to receive [20 hours per week] teaching assistantships during which to schedule and assist individual international students for one or two hours per week as needed. The same teaching assistant (TA) would assist the same international student throughout the quarter/semester.
4. Organize small international groups (five to six students, no more than 10) from among the normal department cohort to meet weekly with a department-sponsored, private-pay tutor, TA, volunteer faculty member, or graduate student to discuss and resolve mutual writing issues.
5. Request that advisors schedule up to one office hour per week to assist *each* of their international student advisees with course-based papers.
6. Encourage international students to combine resources to negotiate and pay for group help from private-pay tutors, community education instructors, or area English teachers.
7. Mandate a writing course based on department philosophy and expectations for student goals, major papers, and journal articles. Provide necessary training for a native-English speaking TA to teach that course.
8. Provide internships or assistantships for ESL graduate students to help international students improve their writing skills.
9. Hire a retired English teacher, graduate student, community educator, or other qualified person to keep regular office hours (at least 20 hours per week) to work with individuals and student groups, and to teach a writing course specifically directed toward writing department-oriented papers.
10. Provide one staff position (at least 20 hours per week) for a qualified person to assist specific international graduate students to follow their advisors' recommendations as they write their major papers.
11. Provide at least minimal training for faculty and student assistants in the culture of the international students with whom they will work. Faculty—or students—who feel they know enough without training would be good candidates to teach the course.

What Else Did I Learn?

This short study provided sufficient information to allow some conclusions and enough speculation to warrant additional research. As expected, former students who returned to their countries of origin were less articulate than were former students who pursued careers or enrolled in graduate school in the US. Interestingly, the oldest participant who remained in the US had the most developed [written] language skills, while the oldest participant who returned to the country of origin had the least developed [written] language skills. Both individuals hold PhDs and are on faculty at major universities.

Phrasing and word choice in responses and comments to each question clarified whether the participant was thinking in English or thinking in a native language and translating that thought into English. Those individuals who are current students were more inclined to “think in English” than were former students who had repatriated. Further, students who were more advanced in their graduate studies showed more characteristics of thinking in English, such as phrasing and vocabulary.

Although both Russian and Taiwanese participants expressed problems with articles (a, an, the), males from both countries were far less open about their problems with language than were females. While females generally sought assistance from numerous sources, males were more inclined to “*not need assistance*” or to seek assistance only from individuals outside their peer or family groups who were “more knowledgeable about written communication.”

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