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ESL and LD students: Diverse Populations, Common Concerns

Fall 2007 / Focus

by **Jane Hirschhorn**, Mount Ida College

The author explores tailoring consulting strategies to accommodate ESL and LD needs



Jane Hirschhorn

The university writing center serves students with a diverse range of skill levels, learning styles, and linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The two most diverse groups of students who visit our offices regularly are students for whom English is a second language (ESL) and students with learning disabilities (LD). This diversity presents itself both in the scope of their needs at all stages of the writing process (brainstorming, fluency, sentence structure, organization, grammar, etc.) and the varying degree to which they need assistance in these and other areas. Although ESL and LD students' writing concerns are often different from one another, these two groups nonetheless encounter common difficulties in language fluency, comprehension, organization, and familiarity with the rhetorical patterns of academic writing in English.

As writing tutors, we accommodate the diverse needs of these two groups by tailoring our tutoring strategies to support them. One strategy might involve spending more tutoring time with each ESL and LD student we serve by scheduling regular weekly meetings with them. Another strategy could focus on reading comprehension by allowing the student to review a reading assignment along with the tutor before the student begins to write. Still another strategy could make use of the writing conference as an opportunity for a student to brainstorm orally before beginning to write. Overall, tutors who work with ESL and LD students need to provide more focused and lengthy guided instruction in the areas of fluency, comprehension, organization and rhetorical patterns.

Organization Problems: The Strategy of Reviewing Rhetorical Patterns

ESL students present some of the greatest challenges for writing tutors. These students are still in the process of mastering written English while at the same time learning to write academic papers. In addition, some students are still mastering the concepts behind the fundamental rhetorical conventions of the American academy. Wayne Robertson, in a written transcript from the DVD *Writing Across Borders*, stresses that educators need to recognize that these rhetorical conventions may not seem “logical,” or even “natural” for this population. He notes that American rhetorical patterns have been shaped by western culture, politics and values that may be unknown to ESL students.

Robertson’s idea that what seems natural in writing is often cultural is important to keep in mind for tutors working with ESL students. Tutors may need to spend some time explaining and reviewing these rhetorical patterns and conventions in addition to addressing other writing issues.

This issue of providing guided instruction with respect to rhetorical patterns was certainly true in my work with an ESL student as a writing tutor at **Mount Ida College**, a small liberal arts institution outside Boston. The student, who spent her early years in China, was asked to write an essay describing her desire to pursue a career in the field of criminal justice. Her draft described a childhood experience of watching a pickpocket steal her grandmother’s wallet at a carnival. The essay involved two rhetorical patterns: chronological narrative and cause/effect, and it was clear that she was having difficulty with both.

Tutors who work with LD students need to be aware of the diverse writing concerns this population faces.

In this situation, I tailored my tutoring strategies to accommodate the student’s specific needs by spending multiple sessions with her on this assignment. It was clear that that she needed focused, guided instruction within the areas of fluency, rhetorical patterns, and organization. First, I spent time with her working on oral fluency, asking her retell her story in the hope that it would lead to greater written fluency. It did. Next, we talked about how she could describe her fear surrounding the event more fully using synonyms, which would draw her readers more deeply into her story.

We also discussed the linguistic conventions within chronological narrative and cause/effect essays. When we discussed how to revise her story chronologically, I suggested that she include transition words to make the sequence of events more comprehensible and organized for the reader. In discussing the cause/effect aspect of the essay, I offered suggestions on word choice (as a result of, because of, etc.) to advance her ideas and connect the two parts of her draft. I know that the additional time I spent with this student contributed to her writing a more fluent, organized and coherent essay in which her ideas were more fully developed.

Comprehension and Fluency Problems: The Strategy of Oral Rehearsal



Jane Hirschhorn with a student

Learning disabled students are another population that makes use of the writing center in great numbers. Diversity for the LD population in writing is found in the variety and extent of these students' needs. Some students have trouble with fluency and vocabulary, while other face difficulty in varying the types of sentences they write. In addition, they often have difficulty in reading comprehension, which in turn affects their ability to select paper topics that reflect the assignment. It has been long documented that the writing process presents greater challenges for LD students than for their non-LD peers (Englert and Thomas). These difficulties can occur at any stage of the writing process. In their literature review, Newcomer and Barenbaum note that: ". . . when compared with typical college students, writers with learning disabilities have greater difficulty with certain aspects of mechanics (particularly spelling), that they are less fluent (produce fewer words), and that they are not as diverse in their use of vocabulary" (587).

Later in the same review they add: "We are presented with a picture of writers whose compositions are marked by irrelevancies, redundancies, mechanical errors, early terminations, and a lack of organization and coherence" (587).

Tutors who work with LD students need to be aware of the diverse writing concerns this population faces both with respect to mechanical errors and problems in fluency, coherence and organization. Consequently, tutors need to tailor their strategies by providing focused, guided instruction for LD students in these areas.

I faced this situation in my work with a first-year LD student who told me she was "a bad writer" and struggled with many of these writing concerns. She asked me to read a draft of a paper requiring her to describe some aspect of herself.

Her draft indeed contained spelling and grammatical errors, but the major problem was in fact a comprehension error: she missed the main idea of the assignment. The comprehension error in turn led to problems with coherence, fluency and irrelevance, as mentioned in Newcomer and Barenbaum's review. I suggested that she might need to modify her paper topic, so I asked her a few questions about herself. In the course of our conversation, she told me that she has possessed great physical strength since she was a child.

In this case, our conversation and her oral rehearsal allowed the student to express her ideas in order to internalize the

metacognitive processes she needed to begin writing.

Tall and soft-spoken, she mentioned several examples of her strength, a source of pride for her during childhood. As she entered late adolescence, however, she became self-conscious of her physical prowess, to the extent that she partially hid it from her male peers. I asked her why, and then her ideas blossomed. She spoke of her fear of not capturing attention of men who would know she was stronger than they were, and we discussed the costs of her deception.

For this student, issues of comprehension and fluency were inextricably bound. What helped most for her was a writing conference tailored to help alleviate the above problems and provide an opportunity for her to orally brainstorm ideas for her revised paper topic. This "oral rehearsal" was successful in allowing her to prepare a written draft, and greatly improved her written fluency and organization. The writing conference enabled me to accommodate this student's needs, tailoring my strategies to allow for focused, guided instruction in fluency, comprehension and organization.

Kimberly Lauffer, citing findings from Graham and Harris, notes that the writing conference plays an important role in guiding students through the writing process. She writes, "Conferencing allows teachers to prompt students with the eventual goal of the student internalizing the metacognitive processes used during the writing process."

I believe that our writing conference that focused on prewriting was a key element in the above student's success. In this case, our conversation and her oral rehearsal allowed the student to express her ideas in order to internalize the metacognitive processes she needed to begin writing. The discussion, coupled with my guided questions that mimicked a metacognitive process, transformed the quality of her work.

Comprehension and Brainstorming Problems: The Strategy of the Standing Appointment

In her paper, "Learning Disabilities and the Writing Center," Julie Neff notes that LD students need more assistance with the writing process that is more focused and guided than their non-LD counterparts, as well as a more directive approach as to what each student needs to improve. She writes:

Most learning disabled students need more support and help rather than less. And writing centers can provide that assistance. For these students, writing center professionals need a new picture of the writing conference that includes the writing advisor becoming more directly involved in the process and the product. (388)

The writing center must accommodate diversity thoughtfully and strategically with ESL and LD students because they struggle more deeply with the complex process of writing in academic English than their native speaking and non-LD peers.

Neff's notion of ongoing, directed support for LD students applies to a student who scheduled an hour-long "standing appointment" with me every week during the fall semester last year. Shortly after we began working together, I suspected he had learning disabilities based on the difficulties I observed in his reading comprehension and writing after he asked me for assistance in both areas. Before working in higher education, I was a classroom and tutorial teacher in two private high schools for students with learning disabilities, and

this student's tentative approach to reading and writing reminded me of some of my former students. Like some of the ESL students I have worked with, this student needed to spend more time before beginning to write. Consequently, I tailored my work to his needs by spending more time on the pre-writing stages of the writing process (in this case reading comprehension and brainstorming) than I might with non-LD and non-ESL students. Once I felt he was prepared, the student began work on his rough draft. As Neff recommends, I became more directly involved in the prewriting process.

It was clear to me that for this reserved student, a standing appointment focused on guided reading tutorials with me, as well as the usual writing conferences, fostered his success in my office and his coursework. Sometimes we focused the majority of a one-hour session discussing and defining the topic headings in his textbooks, relating them to his writing assignments. Like many of my other LD and ESL students, I believe the guided discussion and "oral rehearsal" improved his fluency and helped make the transition from reading to writing.

The Strategy of Tailoring

The writing center must accommodate diversity thoughtfully and strategically with ESL and LD students because they struggle more deeply with the complex process of writing in academic English than their native speaking and non-LD peers. Although these two populations face different challenges from one another in academic writing, my experience has been that they both encounter difficulties in fluency, comprehension, organization, and familiarity with rhetorical conventions which affect their ability to produce organized, coherent text.

The strategies we use to help both populations are tailored to the challenges they present to us in our offices. With the student from China, reviewing rhetorical patterns and focusing on fluency and word choice helped her produce a more comprehensible, organized essay. The physically strong LD student benefited from a focused, guided writing conference and oral rehearsal so as to clear up comprehension issues and spark the brainstorming process. The student with comprehension and writing difficulties made steady progress by taking advantage of a weekly standing appointment that provided him with focused guided instruction to address his reading and writing concerns.

Like a tailor who uses tools and expertise to make a garment fit the unique body proportions of each customer, writing tutors tailor their strategies for each student through the use of the writing conference and their expertise in knowing how to guide and direct students through any stage of this complex process.

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Jane Hirschhorn has been a writing tutor at **Mount Ida College** in Newton, Massachusetts since 2002. She holds a master's degree in Education and has taught LD students at several high schools in the Boston area.

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