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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an ex post facto analysis of the performance of English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) college students in ESL and mainstream freshman composition courses. Students were evaluated on 4 essays written during the 10-week quarter and a final in-class essay. This final essay examination focused on a common theme, was evaluated by at least two members of the faculty, and was graded on a 6-point scale based upon a rubric developed by the Freshman English Committee. During the 1992-93 academic year, 168 foreign and immigrant students enrolled in Composition I classes for ESL students. Of this number, 76 passed the final essay examination, 84 failed, and 8 withdrew from the course. Of the 90 ESL students who enrolled in mainstream sections of Composition I, 30 passed, 38 failed, and 22 withdrew. The ESL students enrolled in special classes of Composition I clearly outperformed ESL students enrolled in mainstream classes, and even had a higher passing rate than native-speaker students enrolled in mainstream sections. The results of a survey of ESL students who withdrew from mainstream sections is discussed. Two appendixes provide copies of the essay examination rubric and the student survey questionnaire. (MDM)

A Comparison of the Performance of ESL Students in ESL and Mainstream Classes of Freshman English

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Freshman English, being a mandatory course, is often a challenge to ESL students. When successful completion of the course is a prerequisite for entry to higher level courses in the students' majors, or when success or failure in the course is determined by a competitive examination, Freshmen English can be problematic to these students. These problems become exacerbated unless writing program administrators make well informed decisions when placing ESL students in Freshman English classes.

ESL students are usually placed in three types of Freshman English classes: with native speakers (mainstreaming); with basic/developmental writers; and in classes designated for ESL students. Although discussions of placement options for ESL students have appeared since the early 1950's, the issue has recently drawn more attention due to the large influx of ESL students into American colleges and universities and the availability of more research on second language writers.

Two placement options, mainstreaming and placement in basic/developmental classes, have drawn criticism from ESL specialists. For instance, Braine (1994), Haternik (1990), McKay (1981) and Silva (Forthcoming) have argued convincingly against mainstreaming and Benson et al (1992), Leki (1992) and Silva (Forthcoming) have opposed placement in basic/developmental classes. However, despite this criticism and more than a decade of research showing the differences between ESL and NS writers (see Silva, 1994), ESL students are often placed with NS in these classes.

This paper describes an ex post facto study of the performance of ESL students

in a Freshman English program. Specifically, the study compares the performance of ESL students in mainstream classes and ESL students in specially designated classes. However, I will begin with a discussion of the disadvantages of placing ESL students with NS in Freshman English classes.

Mainstreaming ESL Students in Freshman English

ESL writers do share certain characteristics with NS writers. Cumming (1989) has shown that ESL students who are expert writers in their first language are able to apply successful writing strategies (such as planning and revising) when writing in English. These strategies are similar to those of expert NS writers. Further, the strategies used by inexperienced ESL writers are similar to those of inexperienced native-speaker writers; they do not plan their writing clearly and have difficulty in retaining chunks of meaning in their mind as they write (Cumming, 1989; Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987).

Despite these similarities, research has shown the significant differences that separate second language writers from native-speaker writers. Silva has analyzed this research, examining 72 studies that compared first and second language writing. The studies dealt with a total of more than 4,000 subjects representing at least 27 different first languages and displaying a wide range of levels in language ability (1994)

Based on his analysis of these studies, Silva concludes that second language writing is "simpler and less effective" and that the composing process of second language writers is "more constrained, more difficult, and less effective" (P.668). Second language writers did less planning at both the local and global level and found goal setting, and generating and organizing material, to be more difficult, and transcribing "more laborious, less fluent, and less productive" (p.668). Second language writers also reviewed, reread, and reflected on their writing less.

Although they revised more, it was with greater difficulty and they were less able to revise intuitively. Their writing contained fewer words but more errors, and received lower scores in holistic ratings (1994).

Silva also concludes that second language writing displayed "a distinct pattern of exposition, argumentation, and narration" (p.668). In using background readings and answering essay examinations, second language writers were less effective. In addition, their reader orientation was less appropriate and acceptable. While their sentences included more but shorter t-units, the clauses were fewer though longer. Although the sentences showed more coordination, they also showed less subordination, noun modification, and passivization. The writing contained more conjunctions and fewer lexical ties, and also displayed less control, variety, and sophistication in the use of vocabulary (1994). [While the typical native-speaker college student has a reading and listening vocabulary of around 150,000 words (Murray, 1989), second language writers' vocabulary is much smaller.]

Although the above differences are enough to cause major problems for ESL students in mainstream classes, another area which is problematic is topic development. ESL writers have little knowledge of topics that most native-speaker writers are familiar with. The 60s, AIDS, drugs, gun control, and divorce, popular topics in most NS Freshman English classes, often pose enormous problems to ESL writers. McKay (1989), who has identified a written discourse accent in ESL writers, emphasizes the need to assign topics which relate to ESL students' background knowledge, which may not be possible in classes where the majority of students are NS.

While surface level errors of ESL writers such as in syntax and diction are easily observed and corrected, teachers of NS classes are often unable to pinpoint more subtle rhetorical differences caused by the diverse language backgrounds of

ESL students. In other languages, textual cohesion and organization may be effected in ways that are different from those used in academic English (Grabe and Kaplan, 1989; Reid, 1989). If teachers of NS classes, with no training in ESL, fail to recognize and acknowledge these rhetorical differences, ESL student essays could be judged as inferior (Land and Whitley, 1989).

In addition to pedagogical inadequacy, placement in NS classes could present an ideological mismatch. Santos has shown how the teaching of composition to native-speakers is viewed in ideological terms, while the aim of ESL composition is more pragmatic. While "changing political goals and/or changing students' political consciousness" (9) appears to be the aim of current neo-Marxist composition theory, the aim of ESL composition is to help ESL students assimilate as quickly as possible (1992). These contradictory aims could cause confusion in setting teaching objectives.

The Present Study

The study was conducted at a medium size university in the south-east which enrolls about 12,000 students. This includes about 900 ESL students, both international and immigrant. They originate from 78 countries and speak 32 languages.

Freshman English is sequenced as Composition I and Composition II, and about forty classes of both are taught every quarter except in Summer, when only five classes of each are offered. The focus of Composition I is expressive writing. At the end of the course, students write a 2-hour essay test based on a reading, and the essays are graded holistically by the English Department faculty. If students pass, they take Composition II, where the focus is on academic writing. Composition I and II are required courses at the university.

Freshman English is taught mainly by tenured instructors who have Masters

degrees in English Literature. Many have taught two composition courses per quarter for 15 years or more. Tenure-track and tenured faculty with Ph.D.s also teach composition on an irregular basis. Recently, about 10 adjunct faculty, some with Masters and others with doctoral degrees, have been hired to teach composition. All but one English Department faculty members are NS of English.

More than 3,500 students enroll in Composition I and II courses each academic year. Fall through Spring quarters, three classes of Composition I and three classes of Composition II are reserved for ESL students. Enrollment in these classes is limited to twenty students. (Mainstream classes have a maximum enrollment of twenty-five.) Due to staffing problems, ESL classes are not offered in the Summer. Both immigrants and international students whose native language is not English have the choice of enrolling in these classes or in mainstream classes. For instance, of the 258 ESL students who enrolled in Composition I in the 1992/93 academic year, 90 chose to enroll in mainstream classes.

Teachers of ESL classes

During the 1992/93 academic year, the nine ESL classes of Composition I were taught by three teachers. Six classes (two per quarter) were taught by an instructor who has a Masters degree in English literature, two classes by an adjunct instructor with a Ph.D. in modern American literature, and one section by an Associate Professor specializing in eighteenth century British literature.

Although experienced teachers of composition, none of the teachers had formal training in ESL pedagogy. Instead, they were trained at a three-day workshop conducted by an ESL specialist in the English Department. (See Braine, Forthcoming, for a description of a similar workshop.) The teachers

volunteered to attend the workshop and to teach ESL Composition I classes.

Syllabus and Textbooks

Both mainstream and ESL Composition I classes have similar syllabi. During a ten-week academic quarter, students write four assignments each averaging 500 words in length. The emphasis of the first two assignments is on description; the last two assignments emphasize description as well as discussion or analysis. For the first assignment, students describe either (1) an activity they dislike, such as waiting in line, doing laundry, etc.; (2) an unforgettable event from their childhood; or (3) a person known to them. For the second assignment, they describe (1) returning to a place that had a special significance to them, such as their grandparents home or their first school; (2) a childhood game played with other children or their family, or (3) the most interesting photograph in their family's collection. For the third assignment, they describe, analyze, and discuss (1) a current article or advertisement from a popular magazine; or (2) a commonly accepted ritual such as a wedding or a funeral. For the final assignment, they select a source from the university library and write an essay "reacting to a phenomenon of modern life" such as computers, fast food, or nursing homes.

In writing all the assignments, the process approach is used. Students begin an assignment by prewriting in class and turn-in the first draft of their paper to the teacher. The teacher then selects a few drafts for class discussion. Following the discussion, the students discuss the standard rubric designed for evaluating student papers at the written test (see Appendix A) and holistically score each other's papers in groups of four. They later revise the assignment at home and turn-in the final version to the teacher. Typically, from prewriting to submission of the final version, an assignment is completed in seven class meetings.

During the 1992/93 academic year, the textbook used in mainstream classes was *Write to Learn* by David Murray. Two teachers of the ESL classes used *In Our Own Words* by Rebecca Mlynarczyx and Steven Haber and one teacher used weekly issues of *Newsweek* magazine. All teachers of Composition I used *Prentice-Hall Reference Guide to Grammar and Usage* by Muriel Harris as a supplement to the main text.

The Written Test

The test is administered by the director of Freshman English with the support of the Freshman English Committee, which consists of the director and five English department faculty. The process that leads to the test begins with a screening of suitable reading passages by the committee. To be considered for the test, the readings should be about 1,500 words long and be accessible to all students irrespective of linguistic or cultural background. For each test, three readings are selected, copied, and distributed to all students about a week before the test is administered. The Freshman English Committee then develops prompts for each reading. The students respond to only one prompt which is given at the time of the test. For instance, for the Fall 1992 test, the reading was William Ouchi's "Comparing work ethics: Japan and America." The prompt used in the test was:

> In a well written essay, discuss and analyze Ouichi's view of the Japanese work ethic ("collectivism"). Using examples from your experience, include a detailed and well supported account of situations when either teamwork or individualism was more effective.

About two weeks before the test, English faculty members participate in a calibration session, reading sample student papers from previous tests. A

standard rubric (Appendix A) is used in rating the sample papers. After the test, a few faculty read a sample of student papers and select a set of anchor papers which relate to each level in the rubric. The rubric and copies of the anchor papers are given to the faculty along with student papers for evaluation.

The written test lasts two hours. Students are allowed to use a dictionary during the test. They are identified by a computer generated three digit number on the "Blue Book" in which they write.

Test Evaluation

With the help of a computer program, student papers are randomly assigned to English faculty for evaluation. All papers are read twice in the same day, in the morning by half the faculty and in the afternoon by the rest of the faculty. Again, the readers are matched randomly by the computer program. During the Fall quarter, when the test is taken by the largest number of students, each faculty member may evaluate about 40 papers. The number drops to around 25 papers in the Spring quarter. For a paper to pass or fail, both readers must agree. If a disagreement occurs, the paper goes to a third reader on the following day. The process of calibration, adherence to the standard rubric, and the availability of anchor papers has ensured a high rate of correlation (averaging .80) among the first and second readers.

Results

As Table 1 and Figure 1 show, a total of 168 students enrolled in Composition I classes for ESL students in the 1992-93 academic year. Of this number, 76 (45.2 percent) passed the test, 84 (50 percent) failed, and 8 (4.8 percent) withdrew from the course. Of the 1,873 native-speaker students who took the course, 921 (49.2 percent) passed, 807 (43.1 percent) failed, and 145 (7.7 percent) withdrew. Of the 90 ESL students who enrolled in mainstream classes of Composition I, 30 (33.3

percent) passed, 38 (42.2 percent) failed, and 22 (24.4 percent) withdrew from the course.

Insert Table 1 and Figure 1 here.

Discussion

As can be seen by the above results, ESL students enrolled in special classes of Composition I clearly outperformed ESL students enrolled in mainstream classes. In addition, in the Spring quarter of 1993, ESL students in the special classes had a higher passing rate than even the native-speaker students (Table 1). On the other hand, ESL students enrolled in mainstream classes had the lowest percentage of passes for all three groups. Another significant statistic was the high withdrawal rate of ESL students from mainstream classes. This percentage was almost five times the withdrawal rate of students from ESL classes and thrice the rate for native-speaker students.

For a number of reasons, the high withdrawal rate is unusual. First, since Composition I does not have a grading system, a failure does not affect a student's GPA. Second, most of the students who withdrew did so late in the academic quarter, thereby forfeiting the tuition they had paid for the course. This was surprising, since many ESL students operate on a tight budget. Finally, students in Composition I classes are encouraged by their teachers to stay on and take the final test, since there is no limit on the number of attempts and practice in taking the test increases the chance of future success.

In order to discover the reasons for their withdrawal, twenty ESL students who withdrew from mainstream classes were interviewed. (Two had transferred to other schools and could not be contacted.) During the interview, each student

was asked three open-ended questions.

1. Were you aware that special Composition I classes are available for ESL students?

2. Why did you enroll in a (mainstream) section for native-speaker students?

3. Why did you withdraw?

Responding to the first question, all twenty students stated that they were aware of the availability of ESL classes. Explaining why they enrolled in a (mainstream) section for NS, seven said that when they tried to register, all the ESL classes were full; six said that they thought they could cope in a mainstream section; and seven, who had taken Composition I in the summer, said that ESL classes were not offered. Explaining why they withdrew, seventeen students said that they did not "feel comfortable" or "at ease" in the mainstream classes. Three students had withdrawn on their teachers' advice.

When asked to elaborate on why they did not feel comfortable in mainstream classes, the students said that they were afraid to ask questions or speak out in class, fearing that their accents and errors in speech would be cause embarrassment. Most of these students stated that, generally, the NS students did not help them or even speak to them in class, and that the teacher did little to encourage communication. During peer review of papers in groups, they felt that the NS students were impatient with them, and one student said that he overheard a NS student complaining to the teacher about her inability to correct the numerous grammatical errors in his paper. One student, who was the only ESL student in her class, said that all her drafts were selected by the teacher for class discussion and that each time an error was noted, the NS students "laughed".

These statements of the ESL students parallel the responses made by ESL students to a questionnaire given at the same institution. (See Appendix B for the questionnaire.) All the students had taken an ESL section of Composition I. Although 52 percent of the students had failed the final examination, 92 percent of the respondents stated that they were satisfied with the ESL Composition I class they had taken. When asked to state the main reason for their satisfaction, the majority of the students referred to feeling "comfortable" or "at ease" in the ESL classes. Although they could not all agree on what caused this feeling, many students mentioned not being self conscious of their accents, thereby gaining more confidence to take part in class discussions. Many students also stated that the teachers paid them individual attention, appeared to be aware of their special problems, and were "understanding" and "caring".

What is apparent from the statements of these students is the lack of anxiety in ESL classes. As Rose has noted, anxiety could lead to confusion, frustration and anger, resulting in writers' block (1980, 1984). On the other hand, a "comfortable," non-intimidating environment, added to positive teacher responses, could produce better writers.

Conclusion

Arguing for a pluralistic rhetoric in American classrooms, Land and Whitley state that ESL writers face a hidden agenda in our writing classes. Even when their essays are free of surface level errors, NS evaluators often find fault with other formal features of writing. To be considered fluent, ESL students must write essays which are "not only grammatically and syntactically, but also rhetorically indistinguishable from those written by NS". This is especially true of classes where ESL students compete directly with NS (1989). However, despite such obstacles, the students in the ESL classes not only performed well in

competitive tests, but sometimes outperformed their NS counterparts.

Although no direct correlation between placement in ESL classes and success in the written test is claimed, this study is a strong indication that ESL students may perform better in such classes. For many ESL students, the required course(s) in Freshman English are formidable obstacles to their academic objectives. This is best seen in the large number of ESL students who, despite excelling in their academic majors, choose to postpone Freshman English to their junior or senior year. Special classes in Freshman English will provide a sheltered environment to ESL students, allowing them to develop a sense of community with their peers. Such classes would also signal the English departments' commitment to a group of students who add richness and vitality to the American academic experience.

The last word in this paper best belongs to an ESL student. When asked to describe his first day in a Freshman English class, he wrote

> It was 8.10 and I was still looking for my classroom. When I found it, the teacher has just started to explain about the syllabus. All the students were ESL students and I felt very comfortable.

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Appendix A

Rubric for Composition I Examination

A 6 pt. essay

- establishes a context for the essay by providing background and purpose and a distinct subject.
- is rich in detail.
- is well organized, easy to follow, easy to read.
- is virtually free of spelling, punctuation, sentence, and paragraph errors.
- operates on a high level of significance.
- answers all the reader's basic questions.
- has a first sentence that makes you want to read the second.
- presents a clear and significant position.

A 5 pt. essay

- establishes a context for the essay by providing background and purpose and a distinct subject.
- has many details.
- is generally well organized and easy to read.
- easy to follow.
- is generally free of spelling and punctuation errors. Also free of sentence and paragraph errors.
- answers most of the reader's basic questions.
- has a subject that may be fuzzy.
- has a good first sentence, but it may lack originality.
- has a clear but not necessarily significant position.

A 4 pt. essay

- answers some but not all of the reader's basic questions.
- establishes a context for the essay by providing background and purpose and a distinct subject.
- has some details.
- is organized, although not as easy to follow as a 5 pt. essay.
- has occasional errors in punctuation, spelling, sentences, and paragraphs.

- the author seems to be holding more than one position.
- has an uninteresting first sentence.

A 3 pt. essay

- doesn't answer nearly enough questions.
- fails to establish a context by providing background information.
- is not very detailed.
- has frequent errors in spelling, punctuation, sentences, and paragraphs.
- doesn't have a subject; the writer may be attempting the impossible.
- the first sentence is boring.

A 2 pt. essay

- will significantly compound the problems of a 3 pt. essay.
- doesn't have a subject.

A 1 pt. essay

- lacks background.
- lacks purpose.
- lacks detail.
- may be off topic.
- composition is trivial.
- is unorganized and hard to follow.
- has serious surface errors in spelling and punctuation/and sentence and paragraph structure.

Appendix B

Questionnaire For ESL Students

Please answer only if you have taken an ESL Section of Composition I. Thank you.

1. Why did you take an ESL section of Composition I?

   (Underline the correct answer.)

   - Your academic advisor told you to.
   - Your friends advised you to.
   - You decided on your own.

2. Are you satisfied with the ESL Composition I class you took?

   Yes No

3. If your answer was "Yes", please give the main reason why you were satisfied.

4. If your answer to question 2 was "No", please give the main reason why you were dissatisfied.

5. Did you pass the final examination when you took ESL Composition I?

   Yes No

Table 1

Comparison of the Performance of ESL Students in Mainstream and ESL Classes of Freshman English

QUARTER & SECTIONS	TOTAL ENROLLED	PASSED		FAILED		WITHDREW	
Fall							
ESL	52	29	55.8%	20	38.5%	3	5.8%
Native Speakers	855	500	58.5%	314	36.7%	41	4.8%
ESL in Mainstream	17	7	41.2%	7	41.2%	3	17.6%
Winter							
ESL	59	23	39.0%	35	59.3%	1	1.7%
Native Speakers	529	216	40.8%	268	50.7%	45	8.5%
ESL in Mainstream	19	8	42.1%	4	21.1%	7	36.8%
Spring							
ESL	57	24	42.1%	29	50.9%	4	7.0%
Native Speakers	343	134	39.1%	164	47.8%	45	13.1%
ESL in Mainstream	13	5	38.5%	5	38.5%	3	23.1%
Summer							
ESL	0	-	-	-	-	-	-
Native Speakers	146	71	48.6%	61	41.8%	14	9.6%
ESL in Mainstream	41	10	24.3%	22	53.7%	9	21.9%
Total							
ESL	168	76	45.2%	84	50.0%	8	4.8%
Native Speakers	1873	921	49.2%	807	43.1%	145	7.7%
ESL in Mainstream	90	30	33.3%	38	42.2%	22	24.4%

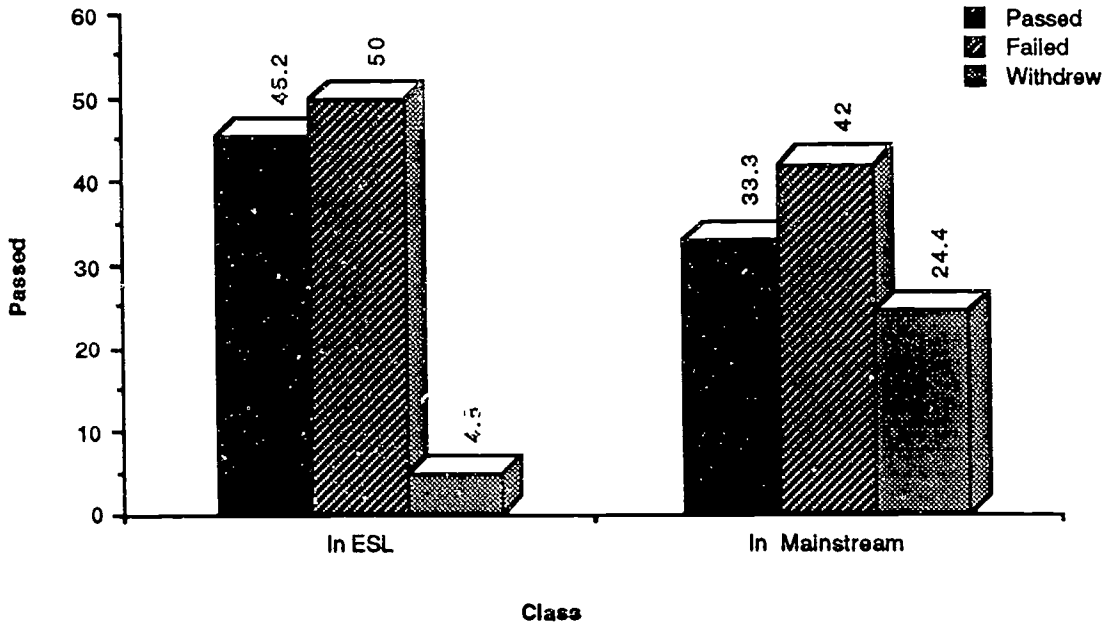

Figure 1: Comparison of the Performance of ESL Students in Mainstream and ESL Classes of Freshman English