

The Struggles We Face

“If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his own language, that goes to his heart.”

-- Nelson Mandela

“You can never understand one language until you understand at least two.”

-- Geoffrey Willans

Why we need a writing center

A writing center is a place where students can come in and get help with their papers. The center focuses on students who need one-on-one contact to solve writing problems with the help of tutors. The tutors', coaches', and collaborators' role is to aid students with information from the teacher or textbooks. Students need help in various aspects of writing from basic revision to finding a more

complex way of writing. What we suggest is based on our experience as bi-lingual students, students who are as fluent in English as in our home languages. Our linguistic backgrounds are as follows:

Anmar Karana (Chaldean, Arabic, English)

Anna Kulik (Russian, English)

Kenny Lanzar (Tagalog, English)

Kristjana Melakuqi (Albanian, English)

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Focus ESL

Looking at Macomb Community College as a whole, the number of students with English as their second language has been increasing throughout the years. Judging from our class alone, the number of ESL students consists of approximately one third of the class. Without a doubt, these numbers will increase in the future. It is easier for these students to attend community college than to get accepted into a university. Community college does not require a certain grade point average (GPA) or a college admission essay, thus making it a viable choice for ESL students to start their education. Following are some of the issues we believe are important to be addressed when an ESL student comes in.

- Grammar

English grammar is one of the most common struggles that ESL students have when writing a paper. The way grammar is performed varies greatly between different languages, causing confusion and mistakes in the papers of ESL students. The difference in grammar between languages includes the importance of word order. Word order is important for ESL students to grasp because it can be difficult for a native speaker to understand what is being said in a paper. “Grammar” means much more than the correct use of punctuation or noun/verb agreement. It also means the way that words/ideas are ordered in a sentence. For example, a word-by-word translation from one language to another produces gibberish. The “grammar” is different, and ESL students need help with that kind of grammar. Too often, ESL students receive lower grades on writing assignments because many teachers fail to understand the struggles that they endure when it comes to grammar. Instead of just marking a student’s writing assignment saying that the grammar is incorrect, time should be taken to sit down with the student explaining how the “mistakes” are carryovers from one specific language into English. If ESL students have the proper help in the writing center, a lot of these problems can be avoided in future writing assignments. A writing center with fixed tutors who understand the grammatical errors that ESL students struggle with will create better writers.

- Gender

Most foreign cultures tend to underestimate the power of women. In the US constitution when they say men, it often refers to all genders. As ESL students, we tend to look at masculine pronouns as just men, because men in foreign culture often have more authority and will than women. Many ESL students -- especially women -- struggle with having a claim and speaking their minds. It is harder for them than for men because of how they were raised. Most don't incorporate claims in their papers because they aren't accustomed to being in a position of having the authority of voicing their opinions. When it comes to writing, women show doubts and worries that cause them to take a different approach, which affects and limits their capabilities.

Gender works differently in different languages. One of the differences is the use of feminine and masculine forms of nouns in Spanish. Other languages have similar patterns, but English does not have this idea of gender separation. On the other hand, teachers and writers sometimes use gender in ways that may be confusing to these students. For example, the Constitution says "ALL men are created equal." Does "men" include women? Probably not in 1776, but now it does. When teachers and writers use "he" to refer to everyone, it isn't very clear. When ESL students go to write, it worsens because we want to use the same

form of masculine and feminine, but it does not apply in English. But when we say or write “everyone,” suddenly it is all about gender. This issue makes it hard to read and write. Gender also means something bigger. It means the differences in ways men and women think, and are expected to behave with how they think and write. For example, lots of ESL students feel as if they are being rude when they make a claim in their papers or when they argue against other viewpoints. In some cultures, it’s very rude to do this kind of thing in public, and in some cultures it’s something that a woman just doesn’t do. I wonder if ESL women have a hard time with some parts of writing because they just won’t do something that they believe is rude. Maybe tutors should be educated about this issue.

- Vocabulary

ESL students often have a limited vocabulary. A limited vocabulary limits the opportunity to write a good paper. A lot of ESL students have to avoid using certain words in their papers because they either don’t know how to use the words in a correct format or they have a hard time creating a sentence. This is not because their English is not good enough or they don’t know how to write a paper, but because finding the right words when structuring a paper is a struggle for these individuals. The things that we as ESL students have struggled with may be simple for students who are native speakers. Most ESL students have a vocabulary of

about 4,000 words, only one-third that of native speakers. Negative remarks are often detrimental to our development as they create a negative effect on our thinking. What we believe might sound like a well-thought-out paper might not be the same when translated into English in most cases. The vocabulary format is very different and is the reason we don't have the strength and confidence to create a well-developed paper.

- Structure

For ESL students, structuring a paper is a difficult task. In order to have a clearly worded and structured paper, ESL students need to know the basics of proper grammar; this includes spelling, punctuation, and key transition words, as well as the use of correct forms of contractions. That process in itself is difficult for an ESL student to grasp. ESL students in particular have a difficult time writing papers because they have to expend more time and effort in finding the right words to construct their sentences than a native English speaker. This task alone can cause frustration with the minimal English vocabulary they usually have. ESL students are unable to express the subject matter they want to apply on paper, and this is a distinct disadvantage from their native English-speaking counterparts, who can commonly present their papers in more effective and applicable ways. A majority of time, when ESL students are given the task of writing a paper, they tend to write in the same

way they would in their first language; this is often due to the comfort of structuring their writing in a familiar way, but also because they usually don't understand the subject matter or what they are asked to write about. ESL students struggle with the process of writing a paper because arranging the words and phrases to create a well-formed sentence in the English language is very complex, as well as very different from most other languages. The necessities of proper English structure include an informative introduction, a thorough body that covers the material, and a concise conclusion for the paper. Many ESL students are being taught the standard form of a five-paragraph essay. Thus, there are a number of issues that fall within the idea of structure: vocabulary, grammar, and sentence structure. These may seem to be separate, but their connections need to be recognized by the tutors who work with ESL students.

I have always struggled to organize and structure essays. Mostly, I disliked writing papers for my classes because I knew I would get a paper back with the pages covered in red ink. My essay looked like a crime scene, because along with struggling to find the correct vocabulary, I would commonly put the words in the wrong order. Words were scratched out or added to try to make sense out of my thoughts. My grammar errors were numerous and there were lines drawn to put my sentences in the proper order necessary to make sense in English. I simply felt

discouraged in my English classes because I knew that, even if I was proud of my paper that I worked on for days, I would receive a grade that was below average simply because the structure required was so different from my native language.

- Comprehension

It is a continuous challenge for ESL students to be able to read, write, and understand materials. The struggle to comprehend materials is one of the reasons their performances are not up to par with students who are native speakers. Comprehension is a vital part of learning. The ability to understand materials when reading is the first important step of learning. Without it, materials are just a bunch of foreign words that do not possess value. Materials read are written with the purpose to convey a message. The lack of understanding of such materials hinders the ability to comprehend the topic. Misunderstanding can cause ESL students to simply go off topic from the given materials which affects our ability to show that we can think critically.

Strategies in comparison with other schools WC

As ESL students, our daily struggle of attending college is greater than those students who are native born. The problems of trying to fit in socially and intellectually are obvious. Our ability to perform at a higher level of education are valued from how we understand materials and express its value. We require a much deeper learning materials from something as simple and basic as reading to understand value to having a paper composed of facts and claims in a well structured form. We can no longer say that a simple assessment of evaluation and correction will benefit us. Our needs to improve our skills must have proper attention that having the right tutor that understands our struggle would be crucial to our development.