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Let's Face It: Language Issues and the Writing Program Administrator

Paul Kei Matsuda

One day, during the first week of classes, a seasoned writing teacher—I'll call her JoAnn—walked into my office. She told me that she had a student in her class whose writing looked "different" from other students she was used to working with.

"He is a great kid," said JoAnn. "He has lots of interesting stories to tell—how he left his country to come to the United States. It's just his grammar he needs to work on."

After listening to her descriptions of the student and of his writing, I gave her a copy of *Second-Language Writing in the Composition Classroom* (aka, the "green book"), a resource book that included the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers and a host of articles about working with second language writers in the composition classroom (Matsuda, Cox, Jordan and Ortmeier-Hooper). I also offered to look at the student's writing to assess the kind of challenges the student was facing, but she declined.

"I'm a good writing teacher," she assured me as she hurried along to her next class. "I will work closely with him and give him lots of feedback."

That she was a good writing teacher I had no doubt. She had many years of experience in teaching first-year composition, and her students adored her. Almost every time I walked by her office, she was there conferencing with a student. She was also a mentor to many novice teachers. Yet, she had no background or experience in working with second language writers. I asked her to keep me posted.

About half way through the semester, I ran into her in the hallway.

"How are things going?" I asked.

"Well, do you remember the student I told you about?" Without waiting for my answer, she continued: "He is failing my class."

The student was failing, she explained, because he had numerous and persisting errors in his writing, despite her providing frequent feedback on the same set of grammar issues. I asked her if grammar was the only problem, and she said that the student had great ideas and interesting details, which seemed to suggest that the student was communicating his ideas fairly well. If so, why was he failing?

“I suppose I could be more lenient,” she explained. “But you know, his biology teacher isn’t going to be as forgiving.”

“Are you saying that you are failing this student because he may fail a biology class in the future?”

“Well, I don’t know,” she mumbled. “If I didn’t fail the student, what would faculty from other departments think?”

In my attempt to find an appropriate response, I quickly ran through several studies of second language writing in my mind that seemed relevant. I thought of Ann Johns’ case study of Luc, a Vietnamese resident student who was excelling in his major but had repeatedly failed the state-mandated writing exam that prevented him from graduating. I also remembered an error-gravity study by Terry Santos that showed that faculty members across the discipline are “willing to look beyond the deficiencies of language to the content” in texts written by second language writers (84). But there was no time to share these research insights with her. She had to get to her next writing class.

This story is fairly typical. When I served as the WPA at the University of New Hampshire and later at Arizona State University, I had similar conversations with writing instructors almost every semester. These issues are becoming more pressing as the number of second language writers in U.S. higher education continues to increase. Writing teachers at colleges and universities across the United States are routinely encountering second language writers in their classrooms as institutions aggressively recruit ethnic minority students (who contribute to the visible diversity of the student population) and international students (who pay out-of-state tuition and, at an increasing number of institutions, thousands of dollars in additional fees). At some institutions, it is no longer unusual to find writing classes where second language writers constitute a majority.

While second language writers bring rich linguistic and cultural resources, among other assets, a growing number of students also face serious challenges because of their English language proficiency, as Doug Hesse described in his post to the WPA-L:

. . . faculty across campus—and in the writing program—are concerned about a large number of student speakers and writers. I’ve looked at enough of their writing to agree that this isn’t just a case

of obsessive profs going nuts over prepositions and articles; there are fluency and intelligibility issues for even an enlightened and charitable reader. (Hesse)

As he explained, the University of Denver, like many other colleges and universities across the United States, has recently admitted “a significant percentage of international students” who “have satisfied the school’s cutoff scores on IELTS or TOEFL,” but whose “scores don’t accurately reflect the comprehension, speaking, and writing skills the students actually possess.” Hesse, like many other well-informed WPAs, also recognizes “ethical and professional” issues involved in working with second language writers in writing programs:

There are undoubtedly problems with our admissions processes. And when governmental funding for many of these students depends on their earning credits for [a] degree, we can’t simply put them into a language institute for a year, for example, and there are only so many mathematics and science courses students can take as they work on language skills. Failing them and sending them home with an “oops, we screwed up in admitting you” is doubly problematic. (Hesse)

Recognizing the complexity of the situation, Hesse asked what policies or guidelines might be appropriate in grading second language writers who are struggling with the English language. This essay is my attempt to address this important question that many conscientious WPAs and writing teachers are facing.

INSTRUCTIONAL ALIGNMENT AND LANGUAGE ISSUES

In the field of education, there is an age-old concept known as *instructional alignment*. According to curriculum design specialist S. Alan Cohen, it refers to the degree to which “intended outcomes, instructional processes, and instructional assessment” correspond with one another (19). It would seem like a no-brainer: The intended outcomes defines what students are supposed to learn in the course or the program; instructional processes provide knowledge, skills, strategies and awareness that are necessary for students to reach the intended outcomes; instructional assessment measures whether students have achieved the kind and degree of learning stipulated by the outcomes.

The term instructional alignment “represents a well-established phenomenon in the history of instructional design” (Cohen 17), and its basic tenets have been widely accepted in the field of rhetoric and composition as well. As a Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) position statement on writing assessment states: “Best assessment

practice is informed by pedagogical and curricular goals, which are in turn formatively affected by the assessment.” It continues:

Teachers or administrators designing assessments should ground the assessment in the classroom, program or departmental context. The goals or outcomes assessed should lead to assessment data[,] which is fed back to those involved with the regular activities assessed so that assessment results may be used to make changes in practice. (*Writing Assessment: A Position Statement*)

This notion also resonates with the idea of criterion-referenced writing assessment, which assesses what individual writers can do in reference to the predetermined set of outcomes—as opposed to norm-referenced assessment, which assesses how an individual student compares to all other students taking the same test.

In the context of writing instruction, perfect alignment is hard to achieve because, as Janet Emig famously put it, students do not always “learn *because* teachers teach and only what teachers explicitly teach” (135). Indeed, it is important to build a mechanism in assessment to account for incidental learning. It is also true that the teacher does not always need to provide everything that is stipulated in the intended outcomes because students are not blank slates. Students do bring what they have learned through previous instructions and experiences. The job for the teacher is to start from where students are at the beginning of the semester, and to bring them to where they need to be—as defined by the intended outcomes. The teacher, of course, does not shoulder the entire burden; this goal cannot be achieved without the students’ good-faith effort. As teachers, we cannot make students learn; we can only create a condition in which learning can happen. Still, the principle of instructional alignment reminds us not to punish students for what teachers do not teach or for what cannot be learned even with the best intentions of both teachers and students. In other words, the outcomes to be assessed must be achievable with instruction and students’ good-faith efforts.

What happens when some students come with a different level of prior learning in comparison to the traditional student population? In keeping with the principle of instructional alignment, one or more of the elements—intended outcomes, instruction, or instructional assessment—needs to be adjusted. In some cases, providing additional or different instruction for students with varying learning backgrounds may help them achieve the intended outcomes. In education, this practice is known as “differentiated instruction” (Tomlinson and Allan 2). If the level of preparation or the nature of preparation is such that differentiated instruction cannot

produce the desired outcomes, the outcomes and the assessment need to be reevaluated in response to the needs and aspirations of the current student population. Without such adjustments, the gap in prior learning becomes an *achievement gap* for the students. If, however, the curriculum is designed in such a way that some students cannot achieve the intended outcomes even with their best effort, the gap really belongs not to the students but to instruction—or to the outcomes-assessment combination.

As Cohen points out, “[t]eaching what we assess, or assessing what we teach seems embarrassingly obvious.” The key question, he suggests, is “What’s worth teaching? This is the same question as: What’s worth assessing?” (19). In the context of U.S. first-year composition, what is worth teaching—and therefore what is worth assessing—is most definitively outlined in the *WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (WPA OS)*, a highly influential statement providing guidelines for first-year composition programs in colleges and universities in the United States. Here is what the *WPA OS* says about language issues under the category, “Knowledge of Conventions”:

By the end of first year composition, students should

- Learn common formats for different kinds of texts
- Develop knowledge of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics
- Practice appropriate means of documenting their work
- Control such surface features as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling.

The *WPA OS* explicitly includes the control of “syntax” and “grammar” as part of the intended outcomes for students in first-year composition courses. Many institutions have either adopted this statement or developed localized versions. My own institution, Arizona State University (ASU), is no exception. The current ASU Writing Programs Goals and Objectives, which is developed based on the *WPA OS*, also mentions grammar: “Throughout the semester, students will learn to . . . use grammatical and mechanical conventions of a variety of discourses in appropriate ways” (*ASU Writing Programs Goals and Objectives*). From these policy documents, it seems clear that students are expected to learn grammar by the end of first-year composition. (For a thorough critique of the *WPA OS* from a second-language perspective, see Matsuda and Skinell.)

WPA OUTCOMES STATEMENT AND LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT

When it comes to assessment, however, it is not always clear to what extent students are expected to learn grammar. The *WPA OS* provides what categories of knowledge and skills are to be addressed but does not stipulate the level of attainment. As Kathleen Blake Yancey, Mark Wiley and others have pointed out, the lack of specific target level is by design—to avoid creating arbitrary standards when students’ writing proficiency levels vary widely from one institution to another. Furthermore, the *WPA OS* does not stipulate how much weight should be assigned to each category. While some institutions may have developed explicit guidelines as to what percentage of individual paper grades can be based on grammar, not all institutions have clear guidelines. For example, the current version of *ASU Writing Programs Teachers’ Guide* states: “Individual paper grades must not be based strictly on grammatical issues.” This statement seem to presuppose that grammar can be part of individual paper grades, but it does not set a specific limit—as long as it does not count for 100% of the grade.

Given that both the *WPA OS* and *ASU Writing Programs Goals and Objectives* list grammar as part of the intended outcomes, and given that *ASU Writing Programs Teachers’ Guide* allows for grammar to be part of the paper grades, it would seem natural to assume that grammar is being taught in the classroom. It is not the case, however, according to this writing instructor: “When I try to teach mechanics or grammar or vocabulary, the Writing Programs here at ASU tells me not to” (An ASU writing instructor, 2008). This comment comes from an institutional survey of writing instructors’ perceptions of the presence and needs of second language writers, which was conducted in Fall 2008 (Matsuda, Saenkhum, and Accardi). This instructor seems to be under the impression that she is not allowed to teach grammar or vocabulary. It is not the case that she does not want to or is not able to teach grammar to second language learners; although she does not have a specific training in second language writing, she does have a master’s degree in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). I must also note that there is no official policy at ASU prohibiting the teaching of grammar; yet the sentiment against grammar teaching in the composition classroom is somehow in the air. In the same survey, only 9 out of 74 respondents (12%) indicated that they addressed grammar issues in their writing classes. If writing instructors are not teaching grammar, how are students supposed to “learn to use grammatical and mechanical conventions” as stipulated in the intended outcomes?

I do not mean to single out ASU Writing Programs or any particular writing instructor; the situation described above seems to reflect the gen-

eral attitude toward grammar instruction in the field of rhetoric and composition. In fact, at a recent conference that focused on language issues in rhetoric and composition, one of the senior members of the field expressed his reluctance to address language issues, proclaiming that he was “a compositionist, not a linguist.” This sentiment also reflects the general consensus that has emerged in the field. In fact, the history of the field of rhetoric and composition is punctuated by a series of attempts to address issues of grammar development—promptly followed by efforts to shoot down those efforts (Matsuda, “It’s the Wild West”).

LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY IN RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

As Robert J. Connors (*Composition-Rhetoric*), Susan Miller and others have pointed out, the creation of U.S. college composition courses in the late nineteenth century was an attempt to address the presence of language differences among native English speakers (Matsuda, “The Myth” 638). During the 1920s, Fred Newton Scott and his students, such as Sterling Andrus Leonard (*Current*; “Old”) and Charles C. Fries (*American*; “What”), sought to improve the teaching of grammar to those students by replacing prescriptive grammar—an idealized standard based on Latin grammar and literary usage—with descriptive grammar—a description of what language users actually do (Connors, *Composition-Rhetoric*). With the professionalization of rhetoric and composition during the 1950s and the 1960s, however, the focus on grammar in the composition classroom came under critical scrutiny. The campaign to apply insights from descriptive linguistics was greeted by emotionally charged attacks from humanities-oriented writing teachers who reacted to descriptive linguists’ preoccupation with the primacy of speech and to their scientific inclination (e.g., Sherwood; Tibbetts, “The Case,” “New Grammarians”). Somewhat ironically, the teaching of grammar was also dismissed by composition researchers in social scientific traditions. In synthesizing research conducted up until the early 1960s, Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones and Lowell Schoer concluded that grammar teaching had “negligible” or even “harmful effect on writing”—harmful because they took time away from other, ostensibly more important aspects of writing (37–38).

During the same period, U.S. higher education saw an increase of international students, most of whom came from countries where English is not the dominant language. Although institutions initially sent students to preparatory schools and intensive English programs before they were allowed to matriculate, the presence of those students became too visible, and some institutions began to create special sections of writing courses starting in

the late 1940s (Matsuda, "Composition" 709–710). After the Second World War, the influx of international students also prompted the discussion of second language issues at CCCC (706–710). Yet, by the early 1960s, the interest among composition specialists in addressing the needs of international students had begun to wane. With the creation, in 1965, of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages as a professional organization apart from CCCC and NCTE, second language issues disappeared completely from CCCC for about a decade (710–713).

The growing linguistic diversity in the 1960s and the 1970s, brought about in part by the civil rights movement and the advent of open admissions, also prompted attention to language issues. In the mid-1960s, Francis Christensen sought to apply Noam Chomsky's transformational-generative grammar to devise a method of developing sentences and paragraphs ("Paragraph"; "Sentence"). A decade later, Mina Shaughnessy, Barry M. Kroll and John C. Schafer, and others borrowed error analysis from applied linguistics to address language issues among basic writers at open admissions institutions. Frank O'Hare and others also applied transformational-generative grammar to develop sentence-combining exercises as a way of helping students achieve syntactic maturity. Although O'Hare's focus was on high school students, the teaching of sentence combining was extended to college-age students by Donald Daiker, Andrew Kerek and Max Morenberg (*Sentence*; "Sentence"). These efforts were also met with strenuous attacks from various perspectives. Christensen's rhetoric of the sentence was attacked for its alleged lack of form-meaning connection (e.g., Johnson; Tibbetts, "On the Practical"). In the late 1970s, Shaughnessy's influential work, *Errors and Expectations*, was also taken to task for its apparent preoccupation with sentence-level errors (Rouse) and for its failure to consider larger ideological contexts of basic writing (Lu). Sentence combining pedagogy was also chastised for its formalism (e.g., Elbow) and scientism (e.g., Holzman).

Another important language-related movement came from a different ideological perspective. Geneva Smitherman and others brought insights from sociolinguistics to argue the legitimacy of African American English (AAE), and their efforts led to the development of a 1974 CCCC resolution, the Students Right to Their Own Languages (SRTOL). This progressive statement, however, was way ahead of its time. As Smitherman has described, the very process of getting the resolution adopted by CCCC and NCTE was riddled with controversies ("Historical"; "Students"). The controversial nature of the document is also evident in the markedly lengthy background information that accompanied a one-paragraph resolution. Furthermore, Scott Wible has documented that an attempt to put

the SRTOL to practice encountered resistance from composition specialists who argued the need to help students write in a privileged variety of English—even while the field as a whole had been eager to embrace the position that grammar cannot and should not be taught in the composition classroom. In “The Erasure of Language,” Susan Peck MacDonald attributes the negative reception of SRTOL and the subsequent decline of language issues to several factors, including: the lack of clear implications for pedagogy and teacher preparation; the racialization of language as Black-and-White binary while failing to anticipate the further diversification of the U.S. college student population; and the outdated, narrow definition of language studies as well as the overemphasis on an equally-outdated ideas about grammar teaching (604). MacDonald also documents the sharp decline of language-related sessions at CCCC since 1975 (589), following the publication of SRTOL, which seems to have created more resistance than understanding or acceptance.

THE DEMISE OF LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY IN RHETORIC AND COMPOSITION

As Connors pointed out in “The Erasure of the Sentence,” sentence pedagogy in rhetoric and composition was beginning to wane by the 1980s. In 1985, Patrick Hartwell drove the last nail in the coffin with his *College English* article. In “Grammar, Grammars and the Teaching of Grammar,” he argued that the knowledge of grammar—or rather, grammars—was too complex for teachers and students to understand, teach or learn. He also argued that students already have grammar in their heads and therefore grammar teaching was unnecessary. Based on these assumptions, he urged writing scholars and teachers to leave grammar behind and focus on other, more interesting topics. During the five-year period following the publication of Hartwell’s article, the number of language-related sessions at CCCC plummeted further (MacDonald 589). Then, in 1989, Sharon Crowley published what amounts to a damning obituary for sentence pedagogy. In “Linguistics and Composition Instruction: 1950–1980,” she argued that attempts to apply linguistics has failed because “Contemporary linguists have chosen to confine their work to areas of language study that are susceptible to mathematical or empirical validation; until recently, they have shown little interest in moving beyond study of the sentence” (499). Lester Faigley also wrote that

The demise of the influence [of linguistics] results not so much from the lack of substance in recent work on written language as it does from the lack of a dominant approach within linguistics that is applicable to the study of writing. Researchers of written language do not

share common goals and methodologies, nor use the same terms, nor recognize common research issues, nor even agree about the nature of language. (80)

I could not agree more with Crowley and Faigley—if we were to define linguistics in its narrow sense of general linguistics that seeks to develop theories of language in and of itself (which has been the domain of general linguistics since Saussure). While general linguistics may provide interesting insights into human mind and the nature of language, abstract theories of language are not useful for writing instruction because language users do not and cannot recognize those rules without years of training in linguistics. As Frank Parker and Kim Sydow Campbell have pointed out in their response to Crowley, however, the limitations of general linguistics—and the conflation of general linguistics with other areas of language studies—has led to the dismissal of various insights from language studies that can inform the study and teaching of writing.

There is another, more serious problem with the dismissal of insights from language studies—especially applied linguistics—that is particularly relevant to second language writers: Both arguments for and against sentence pedagogy in the composition classroom have been thoroughly grounded in the myth of linguistic homogeneity—“the tacit and widespread acceptance of the dominant image of composition students as native speakers of a privileged variety of English” (Matsuda, “The Myth” 638). As I documented in “Basic Writing and Second Language Writers” (75–77), for example, Shaughnessy was concerned primarily with native English users—or at least students who have had years of exposure to the English language. In fact, she described the student population as “native to the United States, where they have had from twelve to thirteen years of public schooling, mostly in New York City” (*Errors and Expectations* 7). In arguing for the end of grammar teaching, Hartwell was thinking only of “native” English users, as he wrote: “[t]he rule, however valuable it may be for non-native speakers, is, for the most part, simply unusable for native speakers of the language” (116). He even dismissed the significance of differences among different varieties of English, as he wrote: “Native speakers of English, regardless of dialect, show tacit mastery of the conventions of Standard English, and that mastery seems to transfer into abstract orthographic knowledge through interaction with print” (123). Crowley’s historical review of grammar pedagogy also focused on those who “endorsed the application of linguistics to the acquisition of native-language literacy” (480). With the presence of an increasing number of second language writers in writing programs, the whole issue of language pedagogy needs to be revisited.

LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY AND SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING

In second language research and instruction, where the need for students to develop the grammar of the target language seems obvious, the importance of teaching grammar has been taken for granted for the most part. Yet, the conceptions of grammar and grammar instruction have changed drastically over the last century. Between the 1940s and the 1960s, the teaching of second language was dominated by structural linguists who insisted that the teaching of English to nonnative users should be based on the application of insights from linguistics (Matsuda, "Composition"). They were "applied linguists" in the literal sense (i.e., linguistics applied). Although the grammar was usage-based (as opposed to mental grammar which is not teachable), it focused on the structure without much attention to the social function of language, and the descriptions were based largely on spoken language. Furthermore, the teaching of grammar was implicit, and relied largely on pattern practice. In the 1960s, Noam Chomsky challenged structural linguistics in favor of mental grammar, but his version of grammar was based on the hypothetical notion of "ideal native speaker" who had the innate and mysterious ability to acquire a native language. He did not provide an alternative theory of language or learning that was viable for adult second language instruction.

In the meantime, there were some important shifts in the study of language that were linked to the emergence of applied linguistics (i.e., applied studies of language, rather than linguistics applied), a new intellectual formation concerned with issues related to language—both form and function—as well as its users and uses. First, the structural view of language as its own coherent system apart from the context of use has been replaced with functional and usage-based grammars—such as cognitive grammar, systemic-functional grammar, and construction grammar—that see language as discursive resources that are tied to meaning. As Rod Ellis, one of the leading second language acquisition scholars, puts it, "the choice of which type of grammar to use as a basis for teaching is not a major source of controversy; descriptive grammars that detail the form-meaning relationships of the language are ascendant" (87). While learning these grammars in their entirety may not be practical for writing teachers or students, it would be useful to become familiar with pedagogical grammar—a set of teachable and learnable rules that are informed by usage-based descriptive grammars (e.g., Azar and Hagen; Celce-Murcia, Freeman, and Williams; Swan; Thornbury). Pedagogical grammar can help raise students' language awareness and function heuristically to facilitate language development or

editing and proofreading, depending on individual students' developmental stages. (For a discussion of pedagogical grammar, see Odlin).

In the classroom, reflecting the situated and functional view of language, the traditional course organization based on a pre-determined sequence of grammar lessons has declined, and the organization of materials based on communicative situations and functions has become widely accepted (Van Ek and Alexander; Wilkins). More recently, and especially in the context of second language writing instruction, genre has become a major guiding principle for the clustering of language resources, reflecting the emphasis on recurring communicative situations (Hyland; Tardy). In the writing classroom, the best way to address language issues that are situated and relevant to individual students is to address them through feedback on student writing. As Ellis writes, contemporary grammar instruction "involves any instructional technique that draws learners' attention to some specific grammatical form in such a way that it helps them either to understand it metalinguistically and/or process it in comprehension and/or production so that they can internalize it" (84).

That second language writers need to acquire the grammar of the target language goes without saying. Yet, the efficacy of grammar instruction has been challenged in the field of second language acquisition as well. One of the most vocal opponents of metalinguistic awareness in the 1980s was Stephen Krashen, who argued that the metalinguistic knowledge and tacit grammatical knowledge were separate and that the former did not facilitate the latter. He argued that second language acquisition happened primarily through comprehensible and meaningful exposure to the target language. Other researchers have argued, however, that, although input is crucial for second language acquisition, metalinguistic awareness does speed up the process (Long, "Does Second Language"). More recently, researchers have explored additional factors that may contribute to second language acquisition, including *output* (Swain and Lapkin), *noticing* (Schmidt), and *interaction* (Long, "The Role")—which translate to writing, metalinguistic awareness, and communication with audience, respectively.

RECENT RESEARCH ON GRAMMAR FEEDBACK IN SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING

In the context of second language writing research, the strongest statement against grammar teaching has been made by John Truscott. In his 1996 review article, published in *Language Learning*, Truscott echoed a long-standing argument in rhetoric and composition in arguing that grammar instruction is not only ineffective but harmful to second language writers

and should therefore be abandoned. Initially, he did not clearly define what he meant by “grammar correction”—whether it referred to direct corrections only (such as crossing off unnecessary morphemes, words or phrases, inserting missing words or phrases, changing word order, changing word forms) or whether it included indirect feedback that pointed out where the error was but without providing specific suggestions for changes. He later conceded that his definition was all-inclusive—encompassing both direct and indirect feedback. His unequivocal rejection of grammar feedback stimulated much debate and subsequent research.

Dana Ferris, in a series of studies, examined the effects of various types of written corrective feedback on revision. In one study, for example, Ferris and Barrie Roberts examined the relative efficacy of different types of feedback: underlining with codes to indicate the type of error, underlining with no codes, and no correction. They found that the groups that received feedback performed better in revising the text than the control group. Truscott pointed out, however, that the evidence in support of grammar feedback was based on its effect on revision but not on long-term language development. In support of this position, Truscott and Angela Yi-ping Hsu conducted a study to examine the impact of direct grammar correction on both revision and a subsequent writing task. They found that the group that received grammar feedback performed better in the revision task than the group that did not receive any feedback, but both groups did not differ significantly in their performance in a subsequent narrative writing task. Thus, the locus of the research on grammar correction was shifted from revision to acquisition.

A growing body of research has shown that the long-term efficacy of error feedback is related to metalinguistic awareness. Jean Chandler compared the long-term learning effects of students who were required to revise based on grammar feedback with students who were not, and found that the former group showed long-term development while the latter did not. In another study, John Bitchener and Ute Knoch showed that students who received feedback with or without metalinguistic commentary performed better in immediate post-test than the control group, but only groups that had received metalinguistic commentary retained the effects until the delayed post-test. Younghee Sheen investigated the relationship between learners’ language aptitude and the efficacy of two different kinds of focused grammar feedback: direct correction only and direct correction with metalinguistic commentary. She found that, in the immediate post-test, both groups performed better than the control group who did not receive any grammar feedback. In the delayed post-test, the group that received metalinguistic commentary performed better than the correction-

only group. The improvement was also linked to the students' aptitude for language analysis, and the connection was especially strong for the group that received direct correction with metalinguistic feedback. In other words, metalinguistic feedback is effective for all students but especially for students who are better at language analysis.

The effect of grammar feedback is also mediated by other factors, such as the type and quality of teacher-student interaction. Bitchener, Young and Cameron found that corrective feedback is more effective—at least for some types of errors (in this case, simple past tense and definite articles)—when students receive both oral and written feedback. One of the possible reasons is the interaction that helps to focus students' attention and clarify the nature of feedback. Another possibility is attitudinal. In a case study of a Korean English teacher and two of her students, Given Lee and Diane Schallert also found that the quality of revision was affected by the presence or absence of trusting relationship between the teacher and students. Another distinction is that between focused and unfocused feedback. The former involves providing grammar feedback on a limited number of error types whereas the latter addresses various kinds of errors at the same time. The aforementioned study by Sheen as well as another study by Bitchener examined the effects of focused grammar feedback on the referential uses of articles (*a* and *the*), and both studies showed the long-term effects of focused grammar feedback. However, a study by Rod Ellis, Younghee Sheen, Mihoko Murakami and Hide Takashima compared the efficacy of focused and unfocused feedback, and found that both types of feedback produced significantly better results in immediate and delayed post-tests than the control group that did not receive any grammar feedback.

LANGUAGE PEDAGOGY AND INSTRUCTIONAL ALIGNMENT

As we have seen, recent research suggests that grammar feedback can facilitate revision and long-term language acquisition, especially if the feedback is accompanied by metalinguistic commentary. Yet, there are a few caveats: Both from research and experience, we know that the development of grammatical competence in a second language is a slow and incremental process, and even though the process can be sped up somewhat by instruction, there is no guarantee that students will be able to learn what is being taught. The current research (with the exception of Ellis et al.) has also tended to focus on a limited set of grammar features, such as articles and verb tenses; the extent to which grammar feedback can affect various language features is yet to be borne out. Furthermore, even for second language specialists, predicting readiness to learn a particular grammar item

is extremely difficult, if not impossible. As Ellis puts it, “instructed learners generally achieve higher levels of grammatical competence than naturalistic learners” but “instruction [is] no guarantee that learners would acquire what they have been taught” (85). If that is the case, we have a dilemma: If grammar feedback does not guarantee learning, is it fair to hold students accountable? If we take the principle of instructional alignment seriously, the answer would have to be negative, and we need to stop punishing students for what they do not bring with them.

One way to accomplish this goal is to put grammar learning into the category of incidental learning—to facilitate learning and reward success but not punish students if it learning does not happen. In practical terms, we need to shift the emphasis from summative assessment (i.e., grammar grading) to formative assessment (i.e., grammar feedback). Summative assessment is the terminal evaluation of student performance; grading is a form of summative assessment. It tells students what they can and cannot do or what they have and have not accomplished, but it does not necessarily facilitate their future performance. Formative assessment, on the other hand, focuses on letting students know where they have been, where they are, where they need to be and how they can get there; grammar feedback is a kind of formative feedback. To facilitate learning, writing teachers need to continue to provide grammar feedback for second language writers along with metalinguistic commentary. Although it does not always lead to immediate improvement or long-term acquisition, it may contribute to the development of language awareness that can eventually facilitate learning. To improve the odds, writing teachers need to develop an understanding of pedagogical grammar, which is essential in providing metalinguistic commentary.

Some teachers may worry that, if we do not grade students on the basis of grammar, students may not take grammar feedback seriously. I would not worry. Most second language writers do take it seriously; in fact, it is usually more difficult to get students not to think about grammar. Students already value grammar because it can help them convey their meaning more effectively, and providing grammar feedback can reinforce the value. Furthermore, grammar grading can discourage grammar learning by encouraging avoidance strategies—students may avoid using structures that they are not already comfortable with in order not to be graded down for errors, effectively reducing opportunities for learning. Even if grammar is not graded, grammar learning can be facilitated in other ways. Keeping a grammar learning log throughout the course and reflecting on language development at the end of the course can help facilitate metalinguistic awareness. Discussing the process of second language acquisition explicitly may help students understand the principle behind the development

of grammar knowledge. Explaining the rationale behind the type and frequency of grammar feedback as well as assessment policies may also create a better understanding of how to incorporate feedback.

It is also important to discuss implications of grammar errors. As Larry Beason's error gravity study has demonstrated, business executives use errors to judge the writer's credibility as a person, writer and organization representative. (It is important to note, however, that Beason's study was based on native English users.) Yet, that does not mean there is no hope for students who do not have a native-like proficiency. Santos' error gravity study showed that faculty members across the curriculum were able to overlook language issues and focus on the content. Donald Rubin and Melanie Williams-James have also shown that raters evaluated student writing higher when they believed that it was written by a student from Bangkok than when they thought it was written by a student from Chicago. This study seems to suggest that readers can understand and appreciate the efforts to learn and use English by students from non-Anglo American backgrounds. It is also important to emphasize that the boundary between acceptable and unacceptable uses are not always clear in the case of different varieties of English that are closely tied to identity. Raising the awareness of these different responses from the readers and providing strategies for negotiating language differences can help students make more agentive decisions about second language learning and use (Matsuda and Matsuda).

What if, by institutional policy or other external forces, WPAs and writing teachers are not allowed to drop grammar grading? There are alternative ways to contain the impact of grammar grades. The key is to focus on the development of linguistic resources rather than to focus on deficits. This principle can be enacted by, for example, using the point-addition system (rather than the point-deduction system) in which students earn points for evidence of successful learning rather than losing points for making errors. Another strategy is to provide grammar grades as extra credits. To avoid holding students accountable for instructional inadequacies, grammar grading should also be limited to what Dana Ferris calls "treatable errors." Treatable errors are those that can be learned through relatively simple, teachable and learnable rules, such as "verb tense and form; subject-verb agreement; article usage; plural and possessive noun endings; sentence fragments; run-ons and comma splices; some errors in word form; and some errors in punctuation, capitalization, and spelling." In contrast, untreatable errors are idiosyncratic and recognizing them requires the language intuition that takes years to acquire. Examples of untreatable errors include: word choice errors, with the possible exception of some pronoun and preposition usage, and unidiomatic sentence structure (e.g., problems with word

order or with missing or unnecessary words)” (Ferris 23). Grading students on untreatable errors is unrealistic and unfair because it amounts to holding students accountable for what is beyond their control.

Although grammar continues to be a challenge for second language writers who are actively developing their language proficiency, it is only part of what it means to be literate. Many second language writers also bring various linguistic and rhetorical resources from their previous literacy experience in other languages. Furthermore, some writing teachers argue against the teaching of grammar because grammar is not important in improving writing quality; if that is the case, that argument should also inform assessment practices as well. Limiting the percentage of grammar grades (e.g., up to 5%) can also prevent grammar from affecting students’ grades disproportionately. As a rule of thumb, the proportion of grammar grades should not exceed the proportion of grammar instruction provided that can guarantee student learning. If, for some reason, the program or the institution deems it important and necessary to assess students based on the myth of linguistic homogeneity—that is, to demand that all students meet the standards that can be expected only of life-long users of the dominant variety of English—then reasonable provisions need to be made to accommodate those who do not fit the profile, including second language writers and users of non-dominant varieties of English.

IMPLICATIONS FOR WPAs

As I have argued, the field of rhetoric and composition has dismissed language pedagogy based on the assumption of linguistic homogeneity—an assumption that is no longer tenable. Given the obvious language learning needs of some second language writers, and given the mounting evidence suggesting the efficacy of grammar feedback that raises metalinguistic awareness, all writing teachers need to learn how to provide effective metalinguistic feedback. Yet, there is no guarantee that students will be able to acquire any particular language features based on the feedback—at least in the immediate future. To avoid punishing students for what teachers are not able to teach, grading criteria need to be revised thoroughly. The issue of grading, however, has important ramifications that are often beyond the control of writing teachers. Some writing teachers, especially those on short-term contracts, may fear that their job security might be in jeopardy if they did not hold students accountable. To ensure that teachers can focus on effective teaching and students on learning, issues related to grading—especially one that is as complex and technical as grammar issues—need to be addressed at the policy level. That is where WPAs come into the picture.

The most obvious action WPAs can take is to create explicit policies about grammar teaching and grading. In the absence of clear policies, the burden is placed on writing teachers who are not necessarily prepared to make those difficult decisions. A helpful policy would specify how much and what kind of grammar teaching and assessment should take place, if any. It is also important to create ongoing professional development opportunities for all writing teachers. Those opportunities may take the forms of workshops on grammar feedback and assessment as well as a professional resource library including books on pedagogical grammar, second language writing instruction, and other relevant topics. Another possibility is to identify courses on pedagogical grammar and second language writing instruction that are available locally, and to encourage writing teachers to take them. It may also be advantageous to hire writing teachers who already have additional expertise in second language writing because these individuals can be versatile in staffing mainstream sections and second language sections. WPAs who teach at institutions with graduate programs need to prepare all TAs to work effectively with second language writers through TA training and practicum. It is also important to work with other faculty members to integrate second language perspectives into the graduate curriculum in rhetoric and composition. At ASU, for example, we offer a practicum and a graduate seminar on teaching second language writing every year, and both are required for all TAs who teach second language sections of writing courses.

Implementing these policies and opportunities requires extensive knowledge and experience of second language writing and writers; it also requires some knowledge of second language acquisition and pedagogical grammar. While a growing number of WPAs today have a background in second language writing, it is not part of the traditional professional preparation for WPAs. Even with the expertise, it is often difficult for WPAs to attend to these issues adequately while carrying out all other administrative duties. For these reasons, some institutions have created an additional administrative position, held by second language writing specialists who have professional preparation in both rhetoric and composition and second language writing. With the growth of the field of second language writing and the recognition of the importance of language issues within rhetoric and composition, the number of individuals who can take on this task is increasing. In the long run, it will also be important to prepare future WPAs—and rhetoric and composition specialists in general—by providing opportunities to develop additional expertise in second language writing—both in graduate programs and through workshops at professional conferences such as CCCC and CWPA. The *CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing*

and Writers urges all writing teachers and programs to embrace the presence and needs of second language writers. WPAs can help make this happen by striving to lead by example.

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