16 Considering the Impact of the WPA Outcomes Statement on Second Language Writers

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The adoption of the WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (WPA OS) by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (CWPA) in April of 2000 represents a watershed moment for mainstream rhetoric and composition specialists. It was the first attempt by a national organization to define a set of common outcomes for first-year composition that was supported by research in rhetoric and composition. In the ensuing years, according to Edward White in his 2006 review of *The Outcomes Book: Debate and Consensus after the WPA Outcomes Statement,* the document "seems to have struck a chord that resonates throughout the profession" (111). White's sentiment is commonly shared among people writing about the WPA OS (Ericsson; Harrington xv; Rhodes, et al. 9–10), and it is not exactly inaccurate depending on how one defines "the profession"—and the kind of students with which the profession is concerned.

The resonances of the WPA OS "throughout the profession," however, have not extended to second language writing teachers or students. Although the development of the document "engaged quite literally over a hundred teachers," (Yancey, "Kathleen Blake Yancey Responds" 379), and "managed to attain remarkable agreement among a very disparate but important group of leaders in the field" (Elbow 178), second language writing specialists were not involved in the conversations out of which the document was formed. In addition, a survey of second language writing research demonstrates that, during the decade since the WPA OS was adopted by CWPA, it has scarcely been cited in the literature concerned with second language

writers, suggesting that it has had minimal impact in discussions of first-year writing instruction among second language writing specialists. In fact, almost nothing has been written by anyone, including second language researchers or rhetoric and composition specialists, about the implications of the WPA OS for second language writers in spite of the presence of a growing number of second language writers in institutions of higher education in North America (for a notable exception, see Preto-Bay and Hansen 49–50). The minimal work that has tried to consider the implications for second language writers often does little more than note that outcomes in general can be problematic for any group of writers, usually second language and basic writers, who are less proficient than others (Sternglass 207–09).

The lack of systematic and sustained conversation about the implications of the WPA OS for second language writers is problematic, especially at a time when their presence is increasingly felt. In 2008-2009 academic year, there was an all-time high of 671,616 international students enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities, most of whom came from countries where English is not the dominant language (Institute of International Education). In addition, many colleges and universities, in order to secure additional funding, are rigorously recruiting international students, resulting in a surge of second language writers even at institutions where there have traditionally been very few. Also increasing is the number of resident students—long-term residents of the United States, including permanent residents and citizens—who grew up speaking languages other than privileged varieties of English. By one estimation, there already were over 1.3 million "foreign-born" U.S. citizens enrolled in higher education in 1990, and this population seems to be growing steadily (Otuya). Since many of these students go through the first-year writing requirements, spending at least as much time as native-English-speaking students, it is important to consider how their presence and needs are reflected in any attempts to articulate the goals and outcomes of the first-year writing curriculum. To this end, this chapter examines the extent to which the WPA OS reflects (or does not reflect) the presence and needs of second language writers.

Second Language Considerations in the WPA OS

A quick glance at the WPA OS reveals that there is no explicit reference to second language writers (or anyone who comes with various degrees of language differences) or specific issues they may face in the classroom in the statement. This is not to say that language issues are non-existent in the WPA OS—there are two outcomes in the statement that are related to language. One of them appears under the heading, "Critical Thinking, Reading and Writing." It suggests that, at the end of the first-year composition curriculum, students should "[u]nderstand the relationships among language, knowledge, and power." While an understanding of those relationships is a noteworthy outcome for any writer, the term *language* as it is used here seems to refer to a socio-political notion of language rather than many of the language issues that challenge second language writers who are in the process of developing their English proficiency—namely, sentence structures, vocabulary, and idiomatic expressions, as well as sociolinguistic and pragmatic concerns ("pragmatic" not in the sense of "practical" but in the sense of issues related to pragmatics). Notions of how language is related to power and knowledge are directly tied to the expectation that students are both aware of and sensitive to the prevailing linguistic and cultural norms of the socio-rhetorical context in which they write. Making students aware that language is tied to power alone does not enable students to assert or negotiate power through language if they have not developed proficiency in the target language.

Another language-related outcome appears in the section, "Knowledge of Conventions": "Control such surface features as syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling." This item seems more closely related to the needs of most second language writers with regard to language issues than the other outcomes. However, the faulty parallelism in the phrase "syntax, grammar, punctuation, and spelling" seems indicative of a lack of attention to language issues—syntax is a subset of grammar along with morphology, phonology, and vocabulary. The goal of "control" seems to suggest that the students are expected to have an implicit knowledge of the English language and its structure; that is, it is supposed to be a matter of controlling *performance errors* that arise in translating the implicit knowledge of linguistic structures into language production. That the WPA OS does not also mention the development of implicit linguistic knowledge seems to suggest that students

are expected to have such knowledge before even enrolling in the first-year composition course. In other words, the document seems to take for granted the native English speaker norm, suggesting the influence of the myth of linguistic homogeneity—the assumption that students in U.S. higher education are always already native users of a privileged variety of English (Matsuda, "Myth" 638).

Even the outcomes that address language-related issues seem not to be attuned to issues related to second language acquisition or the negotiation of language differences. Rather, the WPA OS seems to focus largely on rhetorical issues. As Barry M. Maid and Barbara J. D'Angelo note in Chapter 18, although four categories are explicated in the WPA OS, rhetorical knowledge seems to supersede the others. For instance, the WPA OS states that, by the end of the first-year composition sequence, students should: "Use writing and reading for inquiry, learning, thinking, and communicating [Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing]"; "Develop knowledge of genre conventions ranging from structure and paragraphing to tone and mechanics [Knowledge of Conventions]"; and "Understand and exploit the differences in the rhetorical strategies and in the affordances available for both print and electronic composing processes and texts [Composing in Electronic Environments]."

These desired outcomes represent well the majority of the document in that they assume a level of linguistic knowledge that supports a focus on higher-order concerns in first-year composition courses. As Ana Preto-Bay and Kristine Hansen question, "how will L2 students who are still developing their linguistic ability perform in these areas if they do not receive further *and* explicit instruction in how to use academic English language as well as support in the large cultural transition they must make?" (49). The lack of language issues may reflect the assumption that students enrolled in first-year composition courses already have a native-like proficiency in a dominant variety of English so they can focus on other aspects of writing—an issue that pertains not only to second language writers, but to users of non-dominant varieties of English. That is, even when teachers and administrators are aware of the presence of second language writers in their classes and programs, they may choose not to address some of the common issues faced by second language writers because the WPA OS does not include those issues. The focus on rhetorical awareness in itself is not a problem. In fact, all writers, regardless of their linguistic

or cultural background, can benefit from attention to rhetorical issues. What is problematic, however, is that the rhetorical focus in the WPA OS seems to come at the expense of language issues that a growing number of students in first-year composition courses face.

THE IMPACT OF THE WPA OS ON
SECOND LANGUAGE WRITERS

To examine the extent to which second language writers are affected by the WPA OS, it is important to consider the statement's domains of influence. The impact of the WPA OS is probably most prevalent in the mainstream sections of first-year composition courses (see Isaacs and Knight in Chapter 20). In many parts of North America—especially at urban, open-admissions institutions—it is no longer unusual to find mainstream first-year composition courses that are dominated by students who come from diverse linguistic backgrounds. In recent years, large, research-intensive institutions are also seeing an increase of both resident and international second language writers in mainstream sections. Although many of those institutions have traditionally had separate sections of first-year writing courses for international students, the growing student enrollment seems to have surpassed, in many cases, the capacity of those sections. Even when separate second-language sections are available, recent research on placement practices of second language writers have shown that students, for complex, identity-related considerations, choose to enroll in mainstream sections (Braine; Costino and Hyon; Ortmeier-Hooper). Other institutions simply do not have separate sections; students have no choice but to enroll in the mainstream first-year composition courses. This is often the case at many rural and small liberal arts institutions. Although these smaller institutions have not traditionally had large international student enrollments, many of them are beginning to see a surge of international students from countries that are trying to globalize by sending out their citizens to earn degrees in English-speaking countries.

Yet, mainstream composition courses and pedagogical materials that are commonly used in those courses are likely to be designed with the monolingual norm in mind (Matsuda, "Myth"). While some second language writers are able to perform well in mainstream composition courses, others struggle as they try to keep up with fast-paced

reading and discussions filled with tacit conventions as well as cultural and historical references with which they are not familiar. The struggle of those students may not become apparent to teachers who are not used to considering issues of linguistic and cultural differences. Students, on their part, may not feel entitled to ask teachers to provide additional linguistic or cultural information for a variety of reasons, including having internalized the monolingual assumptions. When those issues become apparent to the teacher, students may still be expected to fill in the gap themselves by going to the writing center, where they will meet with peer tutors who are, in many cases, even less prepared to address those issues than are the classroom teachers (Trimbur, "Peer Tutoring" 27–28). Other students may simply drop out of the class, requiring them to spend additional time and money in completing the requirement. For example, in a study comparing mainstream and multilingual sections of the first-year composition course at a university in the South, George Braine found that 24.4 percent of second language writers in the mainstream section withdrew from the course, in contrast to the withdrawal rate of 4.8% for the second language section (96).

The impact of the WPA OS on second language writers is probably most prevalent in the mainstream sections of writing courses, where the monolingual ideology embodied in the statement resonates with the dominant assumptions in the classroom. The use of the WPA OS, therefore, reinforces monolingual assumptions, especially when the WPA OS is used as a guiding principle for designing or redesigning these courses. Even when second language writers are placed in separate sections, however, they may still be affected by the WPA OS. By default, second language sections at many institutions are considered equivalent to the mainstream sections, and students are expected to meet the same set of outcomes regardless of differing backgrounds and needs. In fact, some teachers who have taught both mainstream and second language sections claim that they do not change their teaching materials or practices, regardless of which type of classes they are teaching (Saenkhum, Matsuda, and Accardi). Yet, the question of whether and to what extent the expected outcomes should or should not vary across placement options has not been explicitly addressed in the professional literature. The common expectation is that multilingual sections will help students to reach the same goals as do students in mainstream courses, only with more attention to the language

learning needs of those enrolled. Still, to this point, there has not been a serious and sustained conversation among WPAs about whether or not it is reasonable to expect that second language composition sections should accomplish the same goals as mainstream composition sections. Put another way, second language students, especially international students, come from much different backgrounds than their mainstream counterparts, and often enroll in U.S. institutions of higher education with much different goals. Any guidelines and policies applied across mainstream and second language sections must account for those alternative backgrounds, needs, and goals.

Another related issue is that of the standards—or the level of outcomes—that students are expected to meet. Given the limited time and the range of issues that teachers and students are expected to address in second language sections (and the long-term nature of second language acquisition), it would be unreasonable and unrealistic to expect that the proficiency level of students at the end of the semester will be the same as native-English-speaking students who already come with a high level of English language proficiency. The WPA OS, as it currently stands, has a built-in mechanism that accounts for this difference: The document does not specify the level of the outcomes (Wiley; Yancey, "Standards"). Rather, it only stipulates what aspects of writing proficiency need to be addressed in the first-year writing program. The benefit of not specifying the level of outcomes is that it accounts for the varied levels of language and writing proficiencies students bring to the first-year writing program. Yet, faculty across the disciplines who are not aware of the distinction between outcomes and standards may expect students to come out of all writing program courses with the same level of linguistic and rhetorical achievements. What the WPA OS does, in effect, is to let WPAs and writing instructors off the hook—because WPAs do not have to guarantee a specific level of achievement—while students are still being held accountable to unreasonable expectations based on the myth of linguistic (and cultural) homogeneity prevalent in U.S. higher education in general.

The Global Implications of the WPA OS

As we have mentioned, the WPA OS does not specify the level of outcome students are expected to reach at the end of the first-year composition sequence. By the same token, and in a positive light, the WPA

OS also does not specify how the outcomes are to be achieved; instead, it provides parameters within which writing teachers can develop their pedagogical practices. This is the beauty of the document—it makes the statement acceptable to WPAs and writing teachers from a wide variety of instructional contexts and philosophical orientations. The outcomes are also intended to help students become flexible writers who can function in a wide variety of rhetorical contexts. For example, under the first category, "Rhetorical Knowledge," students are expected to learn how to: "Focus on a purpose"; "Respond to the needs of different audiences"; "Respond appropriately to different kinds of rhetorical situations"; "Use conventions of format and structure appropriate to the rhetorical situation"; "Adopt appropriate voice, tone, and level of formality"; "Understand how genres shape reading and writing"; and "Write in several genres."

In theory, these outcomes help all students—regardless of their linguistic or cultural background—adapt to a wide range of rhetorical situations. In practice, however, the examples of "different audiences" and "different kinds of rhetorical situations" found in composition textbooks are often limited to those that are found in North American (especially U.S.) contexts. For instance, writing pedagogy that focuses on civic engagement—to prepare students to understand and engage in the public sphere—usually implies participation in U.S. public discourse. Another popular pedagogical approach that focuses on the critique of pop culture often means critiquing dominant U.S. pop culture. Examples presented in textbooks and in class often come from U.S. contexts—contexts that are familiar to the teacher and to a perceived majority of U.S. students, but not to those who come from less-dominant cultural backgrounds both in the States and elsewhere.

In some cases, students from other countries may choose to write on topics that are situated in other linguistic or cultural contexts, and teachers may even encourage students to do so. Yet, teachers who are unfamiliar with those linguistic and cultural contexts may not be able to respond in ways that would help those students develop their critical awareness. Furthermore, the supposed audience for student writing is likely to be prototypically educated readers who come from the dominant U.S. context. Even when the teacher is from another linguistic or cultural context, it is difficult to resist the institutional and cultural tendencies to focus on the dominant image of the audience. (In fact, one of the co-authors of this chapter who is familiar with non-U.S.

linguistic and cultural situations also continues to struggle with this dilemma in his teaching.)

As a result, students who will be going back to non-U.S. rhetorical contexts may not be adequately prepared to understand and engage those rhetorical contexts; even worse, they may end up perpetuating the dominant U.S. cultural assumptions in those contexts, serving as agents of cultural imperialism. There are consequences for students— both first and second language writers—who remain in the U.S. context as well. With the globalization of economy and the prevalence of the Internet, the rhetorical contexts in the U.S. are also becoming increasingly global. Many employers these days, for example, are multinational, and employees and managers often come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Preparing students for different audiences and different kinds of rhetorical situations can no longer mean preparing them for monolingual audiences and rhetorical situations that are dominant in the U.S. context; it also needs to include a broader range of audiences and situations that are found around the globe.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

What do we need to do to make the WPA OS reflect the global reality both within and outside first-year composition classrooms? The first and most obvious step would be to integrate language issues more explicitly. It entails the recognition of language acquisition as an important instructional goal of first-year composition courses—rather than something that is expected to happen naturally and without effort. It would also entail that teachers, regardless of the sections they teach, be prepared to address those language issues at the point of need. Just as writing teachers are expected to be able to help students who struggle with rhetorical concepts (such as the rhetorical situation, audience, persuasive appeals, and genre) by providing explanations, examples, and feedback, so too should they be expected and trained to provide instruction in issues related to language. If the WPA OS were to articulate the need to address a wide range of language issues, it would be able to promote the necessary shift toward linguistically inclusive first-year writing courses.

Some may argue that the issues of language acquisition and cultural differences should not be included in the WPA OS because they

are not within the purview of first-year composition, and therefore should be handled in "remedial" courses or intensive English courses. This position, however, seems to ignore the reality of today's first-year composition classrooms, which already enrolls a growing number of students who are in the life-long process of acquiring the English language as they also develop a high level of writing proficiency. As the CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers points out, "second language writers have become an integral part of writing courses and programs." Another possible argument against the inclusion of language issues is that they are not relevant to all students— that is, native English users who grew up as part of the mainstream U.S. communities may not need those components. However, because the WPA OS delineates what all students should be able to do by the end of the first-year composition curriculum, it needs to encompass all aspects of writing rather than limit itself to what the perceived majority of students need to develop. Some students may already be proficient in some of the areas that are articulated in the WPA OS; in that case, those students can focus on meeting the remaining expectations. The same principle should apply to language issues.

It is also important to point out that the burden of developing language proficiency does not belong only to students learning the dominant variety of English. As the English language continues to spread throughout the world and diversifies itself, it is becoming increasingly important for users of the dominant variety of English to learn to interact and negotiate with users of various Englishes. As we have pointed out, the current WPA OS allows for such global applications of rhetorical principles, but because it does not explicitly include an understanding of linguistic and cultural differences that enable students to imagine the global rhetorical situations, it also allows teachers and students to neglect those possibilities. What this means is that there needs to be more explicit discussion of the ways in which the WPA OS can be implemented to meet the needs of students—both U.S. and international—who will inevitably be writing in global contexts.

Another important consideration is how language issues are articulated and communicated to faculty across the disciplines and to the wider public. If language issues are simply enumerated, it could create or reinforce the perception that students coming out of first-year writing courses should have "mastered" the dominant variety of English language by the end of the first-year writing sequence. To avoid

perpetuating this problematic assumption, the WPA OS—and WPAs who will use it—need to continue the concerted effort to emphasize that the document does not guarantee a certain level of achievement, and that faculty across the disciplines also need to contribute to students' rhetorical and linguistic development by building on what students have developed in the first-year writing courses.

Finally, to further develop the WPA OS in ways sensitive to language differences and different placement options, it would be important to involve in the revision process writing teachers and researchers who have intimate knowledge of those issues. Developing the next generation of writing teachers and program administrators who are knowledgeable about evolving student needs requires a sustained collaboration between rhetoric and composition scholars and second language writing specialists. Only through such collaborations can the WPA OS become more versatile and inclusive, reflecting the diversity of the profession and of the student populations with whom our profession is concerned.

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