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Fernando Sanchez

Purdue University, fsanchez@purdue.edu

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Creating Accessible Spaces for ESL Students Online

Fernando Sánchez

ABSTRACT

This essay responds to the 2012 CCCC featured session, “Access—A Happening,” in which Blackmon et al. focused on “removing barriers and confusing the discipline’s boundaries, with a focus on the bodies and minds that have been excluded.” As a presenter, Paul Kei Matsuda called on instructors and WPAs to create access for ESL students into such spaces. WPAs have long sought out opportunities to allow students to have more of a voice when it comes to policy; in this way, this study examines whether WPA documents—specifically information and support resources available on writing center websites—meet the needs of ESL students. I studied eight OWL websites in universities with large international student populations to gauge how well these sites took into account criteria pertinent to ESL students as evident in the available scholarship: intercultural needs, writing resource needs, plagiarism resource needs, and readability. The article ends with specific recommendations for WPAs to follow in creating documents—online or otherwise—that will incorporate ESL audiences. By following these recommendations, WPAs can be more attuned to the needs of more individuals and can better accommodate access to places which may ordinarily prohibit entrance to those without particular (or with divergent) physical and linguistic capabilities.

INTRODUCTION

As the demographics of the university continue to change to reflect more linguistically diverse students on campus, writing program administrators (WPAs) of all kinds—First-Year English Program Administrators, Writing Center Directors, and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) coordinators—must adapt to the necessities of English as a Second Language (ESL) students. These perpetual changes in the makeup of our student popula-

tions, as Ana Maria Preto-Bay and Kristine Hansen argue, are seemingly small in number and degree, but taken as a whole, will eventually lead to a “tipping point” that will dramatically alter the look and feel of writing programs on campuses (51).

The influence of ESL students on how WPAs perform their jobs has already been noted. Ilona Leki and Todd Ruecker detail how our placement practices should be altered to take ESL students into account. Citing a number of problems with the traditional objective placement exam at her institution, Leki discusses the advantages of switching to a more holistic exam that eliminates the “on the spot” panic that may set in for some ESL students, obscuring what the previous placement exam truly measured (60). Based on his survey of ESL students in ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) Composition courses, Ruecker found that a majority of ESL students who enrolled in composition courses that were specifically tailored to their learning needs expressed more satisfaction with their placement. He suggests expanding the options for ESL students to self-place in the writing course that seems best for them (107), a venture which requires much proactive work on the part of WPAs.

Similarly, Vivian Zamel points out that the first and second year ESL students whom she surveyed across several disciplines at her institution mentioned that they would like their instructors to be more patient, tolerant, and encouraging. As importantly, these students wished that their instructors could provide “clearer and more explicitly detailed assignments and more accessible classroom talk” (511). Zamel notes that faculty across the curriculum should not lower standards for these students, but instead should be more reflective in how they present pedagogical opportunities to *all* students.

In the same spirit, this study looks at how we can continue to address the needs of our growing populations of ESL students on our campuses in our creation and dissemination of documents. When we create such materials as program websites, workshop handouts, and teaching observation rubrics, we should take into account how they will impact linguistically different learners, and adapt these materials to meet the needs of students who may have difficulty understanding the full complexity of the English language and the customs of Western institutions. Specifically, in this study, I focus on Online Writing Lab (OWL) websites as an example of such documents.

Because the OWL website can act as students’ first point of contact with the writing center, it seems particularly important that the website reflect the needs of its student population. This reflexivity works both ways, as it can also highlight what administrators deem most important to post

online. Indeed, as Aimée Knight, et al. note in their analysis of the rhetorical design choices for writing program websites, online spaces “present a sense of what we value theoretically, pedagogically, and technologically” (191). With that in mind, I explore to what degree OWL websites from universities with large ESL populations adhere to the recommendations and findings of ESL scholarship. More specifically, I examine whether the writing center websites in eight universities with high international student populations generally address the intercultural and writing needs of ESL students in an accessible manner. I begin with a general overview of literature on OWLs before contextualizing ESL students and the criteria that I used to examine these websites. I end with some recommendations for how to begin designing for ESL student access into our online spaces. Despite the focus on OWLs and their obvious impact on writing center directors, all WPAs can work to address these ESL needs collaboratively across the university.

OWLs

In “Online Writing Labs (OWLs): A Taxonomy of Options and Issues,” Muriel Harris and Michael Pemberton classify OWLs into two distinct types. The first are online repositories of information that hold handouts for students and general information about the writing center. The second type function as interactive mechanisms for holding conferences synchronously (chat, for example) or asynchronously (email, for example). In the large body of work regarding OWL scholarship, most research tends to focus on how synchronous and asynchronous environments change the writing lab tutoring session’s dynamic. For instance, Barbara Monroe dissects the common messages that tutors send in their feedback to students. She separates the response into the opening overview that is meant to build rapport between tutor and student, the intertextual remarks with specific recommendations, and the closing notes that encourage revision and remind students that they can come in for a face-to-face visit. Monroe sees each of these separate sections as that highly rhetorical “site where meaning and values are shared, contested and negotiated, a site that provokes and promotes new literate practices” (23). In another example, Sam Van Horne applies Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development to the online tutoring space, finding that students who write out their ideas on their topic during a tutoring session gain a better understanding of their writing processes (101).

The little that has been written on OWL websites, on the other hand, tends to focus on design decisions and models for conceptualizing these webspaces. Clinton Gardner, for instance, describes the writing center’s

experience building an OWL website at Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) and the various decisions that had to be made throughout the process. Gardner elaborates on these stylistic decisions, stating, for example, that “All information [on the SLCC OWL] is succinct in order to make the site easier to read. A table of contents remains constant throughout the reading of the site because of web-based HTML frames” (78). Similarly, Eric Miraglia and Joel Norris discuss weighing the benefits and disadvantages to creating an OWL for the writing center at Washington State University.

Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch notes that most of these early studies that discuss developing OWL websites do so through spatial metaphors, and proposes a third conceptual model of space that is based on the Burkean Parlor. She examines OWLs from writing centers at the University of Missouri-Columbia and Colorado State University, noting that they combine “images, sound, and information about writing” to “invoke the Burkean Parlor model—the idea of conversation, of writing process, or working with others” (38). As a Burkean model is built on the idea of including students in our ongoing conversations, it makes sense to extend this invitation to the growing number of ESL students, who come to our institutions and who have different needs than native English speakers.

Much like the general research on OWLs, most of the ESL literature on OWLs has focused on the interactive variety of OWLs and less on OWLs as general websites. For instance, Severino, Swenson, and Zhu compared the feedback requests from native English speaking (NES) and non-native English speaking (NNES) undergraduate students who used the writing center’s asynchronous email tutoring service. The researchers found that NNES students more frequently asked for feedback regarding grammatical issues than NES students, but there seemed to be virtually no differences when comparing requests for help with vocabulary, style, and documentation. Sara Rilling describes her experience of assisting in the creation of an ESL OWL, which required much negotiation between the Teaching of English as a Second Language (TESL) department and the composition program’s writing center. In her discussion of the asynchronous feedback that tutors would leave for ESL students, Rilling notes that ESL students may benefit from receiving feedback through directive language, as opposed to phrasing comments as suggestions (364–65).

While these studies are helpful in uncovering the dynamics of tutoring sessions online, we must not forget the important rhetorical function that websites play in communicating our ethos. In the case of OWL websites, students can get immediate information on a writing center’s priorities with a simple web search before deciding to set up an appointment online or in

person. This is particularly important to remember considering that despite the advances in technology that have opened up new ways of conducting online consultations, writing centers are still more inclined to focus on developing and maintaining simple websites online to advertise their services to the student community than to take advantage of such electronic tutoring programs (Neaderhiser and Wolfe 62–3).

As most of the resources that exist on building and maintaining OWL websites tend to be more descriptive than prescriptive, very little exists to guide us in making rhetorical decisions for including ESL audiences in our webpages. That said, certain writing and intercultural needs of ESL students do make themselves present in the extant ESL Writing Center scholarship and in usability literature. Though not standardized, these documents can offer guidelines for helping us craft our information with a larger audience in mind. In doing so, we would increase the online visibility of our multilingual student body.

DEFINING ESL STUDENTS

For the purposes of this study, I limit the term “ESL students” to international students who are studying in the United States. I used the Institute of International Education’s (IIE) 2011 ranking of the top 25 schools with high international student enrollments to create my sample.¹ Due to time and space constraints, I limited the sample to those schools with at least 6,000 international students (the highest number of international students was 8,615 at one of these eight institutions). I must also note that such universities are similar to the size and population of my own; indeed, this study originates from my own work within the context of my university’s ESL population.

I recognize that narrowing the definition of ESL students in this way is not without its limitations. For instance, looking solely at universities with a significant international student population does not take into account the large, indeed quickly growing, population of Generation 1.5 English Language Learners (ELL). These students, unlike international students, are generally ELLs in high school and/or immigrants from non-English speaking countries, who are embedded in their own cultural communities within American cities. It has historically been, and continues to be, difficult to determine who qualifies under this category, as “U.S. colleges and universities collect virtually no information about U.S. residents’ or citizens’ native language [, and therefore] we cannot say exactly how many [Generation 1.5] students there are” (Harklau 2). Typically, studies involv-

ing Generation 1.5 students require that students self-report their history and language abilities.

I should note that merely labeling all international students as ESL learners is problematic as well. For instance, due in part to British colonialism and the impact of globalization, many students from India do not need the same level of English instruction in college as students from other countries where English instruction is not as prevalent. The same can be said of many Canadian international students. Indeed, there may often be students who come in with exceptional grammar knowledge that exceeds that of their classmates or even instructors, but who have difficulty applying these rules because they have not had much oral practice with the language.²

Despite these limitations, however, using international students as a gauge for this study can be useful seeing as how many studies that have focused on ESL students' needs and their differences from NES students are based on populations from countries such as those listed in the IIE report. Indeed the report lists China, South Korea, and India as the top three countries of origin for international students, and without fail all three were represented in the top five countries of origin for each of these eight universities (See Table 1). The data were collected from each university's information online regarding its international student enrollment.

Table 1. Leading Countries of Origin of International Students in the US

| Country of Origin | China | India | South Korea |
|---|-------|-------|-------------|
| Rank on the IIE Leading Places of Origin across all American universities | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Rank in University A | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| Rank in University B | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| Rank in University C | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Rank in University D | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Rank in University E | 1 | 4 | 2 |
| Rank in University F | 1 | 3 | 2 |
| Rank in University G | 1 | 2 | 3 |
| Rank in University H | 1 | 2 | 3 |

Furthermore, these institutions, like many around the country that accept international students, grant enrollment under the condition that these students receive minimum scores on various assessments such as the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) exam, the IELTS (Inter-

national English Language Testing System) exam, as well as other measures within the institution upon acceptance. Yet, despite some of the rather high minimum scores that students need for admission into these eight universities, international students may still be admitted needing significant language instruction. For example, the Educational Testing Service (ETS), which administers the TOEFL exam, notes that its internet-based version of the test is broken down into four sections (Reading, Speaking, Listening, and Writing) with scores ranging from 0 to 30 for each section for a maximum score of 120. Universities A and B in this sample ask that students score at least 100 on the exam; University H asks that students score 100 on the exam and that they score at least 20 on each section. Even within these strictest of requirements, students can be admitted with scores that fall in the fair or intermediate skill range in one of the four tested categories (see Table 2). I use this to illustrate how students enrolled in these institutions are not that much different from those admitted elsewhere; in fact, students enrolled in other universities with more lenient requirements may have more writing and comprehension needs.

Table 2. Comparison of Minimum TOEFL Scores Needed for Admission

| | TOEFL score needed (internet-based test)—out of 120 |
|--------------|---|
| University A | 100 |
| University B | 100 (Suggested) |
| University C | 79 |
| University D | 79 with minimum subject scores of Reading 19, Listening 16, Speaking 18, and Writing 18 |
| University E | 83 |
| University F | 79 |
| University G | 88 with minimum subject scores of Reading 23, Listening 23, Speaking 21 and Writing 21 |
| University H | 100 with at least 20 in each section |

CRITERIA

As I have noted, although there are no clear standards for how to create these webpages with ESL students in mind, there are general guidelines that we can stitch together scattered across ESL research, writing center studies, and website usability documents. In the following section, I detail the needs of ESL students across four dimensions that are most prevalent in writing center scholarship, writing research, and usability literature: inter-

cultural needs, writing resource needs, plagiarism resource needs, and readability. I provide a brief overview of my criteria in this next section before turning to the results of the data.

Intercultural Needs

Shanti Bruce explains that ESL students are eager to come into the writing center but experience some anxiety before their sessions because they do not know what to expect, particularly if they are international students who come from academic environments in which writing centers are not prominent or non-existent (31). Bruce states, however, that often these anxieties dissipate once the student enters the writing center and is greeted warmly by her tutor. Yet, despite this friendly atmosphere, tutors and students can often find themselves working toward two completely different aims.

This conflict occurs most frequently when ESL students come in prioritizing grammar and proofreading concerns, while tutors have been instructed to focus more closely on higher order concerns such as organization and meaning. Terese Thonus shares her experiences of “the frustrated ESL student and [the] equally frustrated tutor squar[ing] off against one another, both under pressure to meet an unrealistic deadline. The student says, ‘I want her to check my grammar, but she won’t’; the tutor says, ‘It’s against my ethics to proofread’” (21). I imagine that all WC tutors have experienced this at some point in their careers.

To ease the gridlock between tutor and student, Tony Silva and Muriel Harris recommend an open approach to communicating expectations. They write, “Tutors need to tell ESL writers that it is unrealistic for them to expect to be able to write like native speakers of English—especially when it comes to the small but persistent problems like articles and prepositions” (531). Furthermore, clearly stating that tutors do not edit should not mislead ESL students into thinking that tutors are incapable of assisting with any grammar needs, as there are numerous benefits to this type of instruction during a session. A clear explanation of the distinction between grammar instruction and personal editing would help students better understand the parameters of the tutor’s help.

Given this information, it seems that at the most basic level our documents need to communicate to ESL students the purpose and limitations of the writing center. In this particular case, writing center websites should discuss the expectations and policies for students who arrive for a session. However, students may still come in with the expectation that they can simply sit back and let the tutor do most of the work. Jane Cogie discusses the benefits of tutors and students engaging in a mutual negotiation of

meaning in a text. This involves the equal participation of both parties (53). If this type of exchange is encouraged for discussions of grammar, it would be beneficial to let students know ahead of time in what ways they will be asked to actively engage with the tutor regarding their writing.

Writing Resource Needs

In his review of second language writing scholarship, Silva mentions that ESL writers seemed to do less planning, had more difficulty understanding their instructors' assignments, and did less goal setting when compared to NES students ("Distinct Nature" 661). They also did less reviewing and rereading of their written texts, and when they revised, it was a more laborious task (668). He recommends that instructors provide "more work on planning—to generate ideas, text structure, and language—so as to make the actual writing more manageable. They may need to have their students draft in stages . . ." (671). Although there have not been many studies that look at how pre-planning strategies impact second language writers, the few that exist provide a good analysis of useful exercises. For instance, in Maki Ojima's study, ESL students were more likely to risk using a larger variety of words and expressions when they had time to plan and brainstorm before writing an assignment compared to when they were asked to compose without any prewriting activity. All this to say that if ESL students are coming in to the writing center with particular needs, it makes sense to have helpful and visible electronic resources ready for ESL students to use.

Plagiarism Resource Needs

Much of the scholarship regarding second language learners and plagiarism has started to focus primarily on the different cultural interpretations regarding the borrowing of others' ideas (Bloch 13–14). Kurt Bouman argues that students from collectivist cultures, which stress collaboration, might struggle with constructing independent arguments in Western countries, where the individual is emphasized and writers are expected to develop their own ideas (108). Such an emphasis on originality may be difficult for students to grasp, particularly if their culture primarily values the memorization and recitation of important passages in writing (Hayward 9–10).

Typically, plagiarism in broader discussions is presented as students' copying of others' ideas—whether knowingly or unknowingly—due to a lack of time or an inability to develop their own ideas. But this may not always be the case for ESL students. For instance, as Pat Currie points out, ESL students face particular challenges when it comes to plagiarism when

their instructors emphasize that they should eliminate grammatical “awkwardness” from their writing. Plagiarism here occurs not because students are short on time, but because they wish to sound as precise and graceful as the authors they read. Indeed, as Currie acknowledges, this practice of finding the appropriate phrases to patch together takes even more time than simply paraphrasing and attributing credit to the author (9). Because ESL students often do not understand the cultural underpinnings behind plagiarism, there may be a need to provide ESL students with resources that explain the institutional and cultural reasons behind our policies for improperly borrowing others’ work.

Readability

When Colpo, Fullmer, and Lucas developed their writing center website at the University of Nevada at Reno, they “conceptualized the Website as a billboard that would increase awareness of the writing center and encourage clients to come in for tutorials” (78). This approach involves keen audience awareness. In fact, the researchers are in tune with Steve Krug, a website usability writer, who states that we should design webpages precisely as billboards—with easy-to-identify information that is readable (*Don’t Make 21*). Although there are no set standards for writing for international audiences,⁴ there are several website design practices that make for more accessible sites. As it is beyond the scope of this article to look at all of the various design practices for creating usable spaces, I will focus solely on readability since it has previously been linked with ESL needs.

Specifically, in “Language Problems to Be Coped with in Web Localization” Pinfan Zhu notes that “non-native speakers feel more comfortable reading short sentences” and suggests that writers keep Rudolf Flesch’s statistics in mind when communicating with cross-cultural audiences (61). In his 1946 text *The Art of Plain Talk*, Flesch notes that sentence readability falls within a spectrum based on the number of words that are used. For instance, the average reader can process sentences that are 17 words long, while fairly difficult “literary English” sentences are composed of 21 words and *very* difficult “scientific English” sentences are 30 words long (61). This might be difficult for those of us who have spent years teaching “literary English” in English and Rhetoric programs, but as Krug reminds us, we should treat websites as billboards, not high literature.

Summary

To sum up, the criteria I chose for evaluating these writing center websites was derived from research across ESL scholarship, usability documents, and writing center theory. In particular, I looked for

- *Intercultural Needs*: clear policies on what is expected of students as well as a description of their role in the tutoring session.
- *Writing Resource Needs*: exercises and handouts that deal with the composing process and which are addressed to ESL students.
- *Plagiarism Resource Needs*: a discussion of the cultural differences regarding the borrowing of other people's work and ideas.
- *Readability*: an average word count of 17 words per sentence.

METHOD

To find the criteria above, I went to each of the eight universities' websites and typed in the keywords "Writing Center" in the site-wide search bar. In all eight instances, a page to the writing center (or writing lab) returned as the top result—although the page itself varied by site. For instance, the welcome page was the top result for some sites while the "About Us" page was the top result for another.

Intercultural Needs

As the literature suggests that ESL students have a difficult time understanding the parameters of a tutoring session when it comes to editing, I searched through each of the sites for language that indicated that tutors did not proofread papers. Understanding that each website is configured differently depending on the structure not only of the server space but also of the placement of the writing center within the university (sometimes as part of the composition program, other times as a stand-alone entity), I searched for any language discussing "editing" or "proofreading" as key terms throughout the various pages of the website. For instance, I did not limit myself to the "policies" section or page of these sites to find this discussion.

Because the scholarship also suggests that tutors be proactive in telling ESL students that tutors can teach proofreading skills in order to give students the autonomy to correct errors themselves (Silva and Harris), I also looked through the various pages for any language that spoke to this need. When a site discussed that tutors could "teach" editing skills, or mentioned that tutors "helped students learn" how to proofread and "identify errors" on their own papers, I marked the site as having communicated

this information to students. Finally, I searched for language that described the mutual participation required in a consultation by looking for words such as “collaborate,” “engage” and “participate” or phrases such as “work together” when describing what to expect during a session. I did not limit myself to these words however, as each site that discussed the collaborative purpose of a session did so with different terms.

Writing Resource Needs

To find my criteria of specific ESL resources, I examined each of the eight websites’ pages or sections, looking for any headings or subheadings that clearly demarked a section or a page as being specifically for ESL or International learners. I also searched through pages and sections of general resources to see if within those pages or sections there were any subheadings or subsections that specifically addressed ESL students. For instance, if a resource dealt with planning, I searched for any alternate way of explaining the resource that was aimed specifically toward ESL students, perhaps mentioning any cultural differences to help explain goal-setting for Western academic writing.

Plagiarism Resource Needs

I first looked through these eight websites for a tab or a section that defined plagiarism in a general manner. I then read through each of those discussions of plagiarism, searching for language that addressed any differences in the way that cultures conceptualized borrowing or stealing ideas. These sections or separate pages did not have to fall under any ESL umbrella. As with my search for ESL resources, I was open to the possibility that an ESL audience might be addressed within the broader discussion of this topic. Initial key terms that I looked for were: “culture,” “norms,” “Western,” and “values.”

Readability

To gauge readability, I performed a word count on the number of words per sentence on a page from each website. Due to time constraints (some websites have an abundant number of pages), I compared one page on each site. As each website in this sample is structured differently according to its users’ and administrators’ needs, it was challenging to find similar pages to compare, but I decided on comparing the page on each site that listed the expectations for students during their tutoring session (see Intercultural Needs). This seemed like a logical choice given that it was the only page that existed on each of the eight websites (although under different

headings such as “services,” “policies,” or “FAQs”). I copied and pasted the information from each page (excluding navigation menus and tabs) into a Microsoft Word document and used the Readability Statistics function to determine the number of words and the number of sentences on the page. The former number was divided by the latter for each website to determine the average words per sentence.

RESULTS

Intercultural Needs

All of the writing center websites in the sample clearly mentioned that students should not come in expecting the tutor they meet with to edit their paper (see Table 3). Seven of the eight sites (A, C, D, E, F, G, H) went further and explained that tutors would, however, be capable of *teaching* students how to edit and proofread their own work. Communicating this information before the first session gives students an idea of how tutors can help with grammar. Five sites (A, B, D, E, H) described the role of the student during a consultation. To show the mutual participation required in sessions, websites used words like “interactive” or “together,” or requested that students “be active, not passive.” Two asked students to prepare an agenda in order to guide the session along. One provided students with sample questions that they could use to model their own agendas for the session. As these websites indicate, there seems to be a growing need to emphasize the interactivity of a tutor/student relationship.

Table 3. How Writing Center Websites Discussed Their Policies Regarding Editing

| Website | Mentioned that tutors did not edit or proofread students papers | Mentioned that tutors could help students learn to proofread their own papers | Had language describing the mutual participation required in a consultation with a peer tutor using words such as “collaborate,” “participate,” “together,” etc. |
|---------|---|---|--|
| A | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| B | Yes | No | Yes |
| C | Yes | Yes | No |
| D | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| E | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| F | Yes | Yes | No |
| G | Yes | Yes | No |
| H | Yes | Yes | Yes |

Writing Resource Needs

Only three websites (D, F, H) had resources *specifically* listed for ESL writers, but they dealt mainly with grammatical and mechanical issues, such as how to use proper punctuation, vocabulary, and pronouns, or listed links as generic “grammar help” (see Table 4). Although I had initially set out to only document the resources on each of these pages, I found that these websites had different ways of providing resources to students. For instance, websites F and H “outsourced” resources by linking to external sites. Website D was the only one that provided “in house” resources (as in, made by the tutors and staff of the writing center for their particular population). The other websites did have general writing resources but none targeted to ESL students specifically.

I also found it interesting that two of these eight sites explicitly stated that the respective writing centers were unable to assist ESL students whose language proficiency fell beneath a certain (unstated) level, and recommended that said students contact a particular department or program on campus for writing help. Although such statements demonstrate that there has been some reflection and collaboration between departments in order to determine who can provide the best services on campus for students, neither website actually linked to the departments or programs that they mentioned. Despite the fact that urls and websites can change or disappear altogether, there is a real need to provide more information rather than less regarding instruction. How do I contact a certain department? What service should I request? With whom should I speak? These are a few questions that wavering students might ask themselves before deciding not to bother with getting any help because they are unsure how to go about it.

Table 4: Websites Containing Writing Resources for ESL Students

| Website | Contained “dedicated” ESL resources | If yes, type of resources listed | Students directed to a different department that could help? |
|---------|-------------------------------------|--|--|
| A | No | N/A | No |
| B | No | N/A | Yes (no links) |
| C | No | N/A | No |
| D | Yes—located on their own page | In house—grammar and mechanics instruction and exercises such as sentence combining, punctuation | N/A |

| Website | Contained “dedicated” ESL resources | If yes, type of resources listed | Students directed to a different department that could help? |
|---------|--|--|--|
| E | No | N/A | No |
| F | Yes—located on their own page | Outsourced—links to grammar and dictionary sites | N/A |
| G | Yes—located as a section of student resources page | N/A | Yes (no links) |
| H | Yes—located as a section of student resources page | Outsourced—links to grammar and dictionary sites | N/A |

I should point out that English language centers exist at many of these institutions that also provide ESL students with opportunities to improve their writing and speaking. While that may be a reason for the lack of more abundant or better labeled resources for ESL students on these writing center websites, most of the language centers require students to apply and to pay fees for intensive English language courses. Indeed, these programs are open to anyone around the globe who feels that he or she needs help with his or her English language acquisition, but can range from \$400 to \$5,000 per semester, not counting rooming and boarding fees or insurance premiums, depending on the length and level of the program. These programs tailor their instruction to the specific level of proficiency of each student because they are able to test and assess students using their own metrics in order to place them in the appropriate course.

For example, an English language center in University A offers intensive courses that range from a few days to three months. Some of these centers also customize their courses to fit with a student’s particular field of study, such as University E’s English language center, which offers elective classes in business English, drama, and American culture. While it is beyond the scope of this essay to examine these centers and their websites, we should keep in mind that some universities have taken steps to more specifically tailor courses to, and provide explicit resources for, English language learners.

Plagiarism Resource Needs

Five websites (B, C, D, G, H) described plagiarism for students by using examples, citing university policy against plagiarism, and suggesting tips to avoid plagiarism. However, only one of these pages mentioned that there

are different cultural practices and standards when it comes to borrowing work (see Table 5). As websites with dedicated ESL spaces devote the entirety of their ESL resources to grammatical issues, plagiarism is for the most part discussed generally as a negative mechanism that students use to cope with having insufficient time or ideas to write a paper.

Table 5: Websites Containing Information on Plagiarism

| Website | Defined plagiarism for students | Discussed cultural differences in the definition of plagiarism | Notes |
|---------|---------------------------------|--|---|
| A | No | N/A | |
| B | Yes | No | A discussion of plagiarism was located outside the writing center page, under the broader writing program's resources for students |
| C | Yes | No | |
| D | Yes | Yes—mentioned in one paragraph | |
| E | No | N/A | A note to instructors informed them that consultants would discuss plagiarism in person with new students at the start of every session |
| F | No | N/A | |
| G | Yes | No | |
| H | Yes | No | |

Readability

Most of the websites can be considered to be readable based on Flesch's scale. Only Websites B, G, and H come close to being categorized as "fairly difficult" to read. One thing to note is the disparity of the layout of the web documents. Website A has many policies listed across 83 sentences with 1110 words, while Website C's page on proofreading contained only

16 sentences and 253 words because other information was spread across numerous other pages.

Table 6: Readability Scores for Writing Center Websites

| Website | Number of words | Number of sentences | Words per sentence (17 recommended) |
|---------|-----------------|---------------------|-------------------------------------|
| A | 1110 | 83 | 13.4 |
| B | 857 | 44 | 19.4 |
| C | 253 | 16 | 15.8 |
| D | 1394 | 81 | 17.2 |
| E | 809 | 45 | 17.8 |
| F | 374 | 21 | 16.3 |
| G | 344 | 18 | 19.1 |
| H | 374 | 19 | 19.6 |

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Intercultural Needs

All eight sample websites communicated to students that their tutors did not edit during a session. That all but one of these eight sites also noted that they could teach students proofreading skills to edit their own papers can be viewed optimistically in that writing centers are adequately explaining their function and purpose to their online visitors. Even though this information is displayed online, writing instructors and WAC coordinators should continue to think of the writing center as a resource to help students learn how to identify and resolve both lower order and higher order concerns in their writing. It would also be wise to periodically check in on departmental policies regarding sentence-level errors and have conversations with faculty in other departments regarding the distinction between an “error” and a “difference.”⁵ Here, I re-emphasize Gail Shuck’s call for WPAs to reach out and educate faculty across the institution through workshops and conversations on the linguistic diversity found in ESL students’ writing (70–2).

Writing Resource Needs

It seems that the bulk of the material put online to help ESL students primarily deals with grammar help. In addition to providing ESL students with grammar instruction, we should also be teaching them to identify

other types of issues that arise in the writing process. There are, as I have mentioned, general resources on the composing process available to all students on these websites, but efforts should be made to tailor exercises to the specific needs of ESL students. We need to be more aware of the differences in learning that learners of second languages experience. On planning, for example, Rosa M. Manchón and Julio Roca de Larios find a correlation between the level of proficiency in second language writers and their time spent on planning, suggesting that different exercises pertaining to the drafting processes might need to be created for different levels of English proficiency.

Moreover, we should be cognizant of the cultural differences that come into play when developing instructional exercises for ESL students. To illustrate, in her comparison of American and Chinese OWL instruction materials on argumentation, Li Liu notes that the two groups explained the purpose and structure of an argument in similar ways, but with important differences. For instance, the American instructions emphasized the value of anticipating counter arguments while the Chinese instructions discussed the importance of engaging in “dialectical materialism,” which, as Liu explains, stems from the fact that Marxist politics and philosophy are required courses in high school and upper primary school (14). In contrast to American approaches to argument, which explained how to incorporate logical and informal reasoning, the Chinese materials in Liu’s study emphasized supporting one’s thesis with philosophical theories and principles—in particular, Marxist, Leninist, and Maoist (9). Although Liu’s research focus is more on contrastive rhetoric than on OWL development, her study is a reminder that there may be some cultural differences that need to be taken into account when creating instructional resources for ESL students.

There should also be more care given to linking to exercises and handouts for ESL students. Two of the three webpages (F and H) that had special sections or pages for ESL students outsourced their links to other websites. This approach is fine when time and resources are too limited to create one’s own handouts. However, writing center directors need to remain constantly vigilant that the links are still active, as broken links may go unreported by users. Additionally, it may be daunting for students to examine an entirely different site’s seemingly endless page of links when they are not sure what they might be looking for—particularly when these sites do not adhere to best practices in web design (such as those sites that have poor color contrast, confusing proximity, etc). Linking to specific exercises or lessons can reduce this initial disorientation. For example, when linking to an outsourced handout on pronoun usage, instead of creating a general

“ESL help” link to another website’s home page, create a link that connects directly to the “pronoun use” handout that students should see on that site.

Plagiarism Resource Needs

Clearly more needs to be done to discuss plagiarism as a cultural construct. A key suggestion in the Council of Writing Program Administrators’ “Defining and Avoiding Plagiarism: The WPA Statement on Best Practices” notes that WPAs can help students avoid plagiarism by “[p]roviding support services (for example, writing centers or Web pages) for students who have questions about how to cite sources” (4). Although most of the websites in this sample clearly discussed plagiarism and its consequences, thus following the suggestions in the WPA Statement, hardly any engaged with ESL students on the different ways that cultures view the borrowing of others’ ideas and words. We must keep the “CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers” in mind, which states that “[t]extual ownership and the ownership of ideas are concepts that are culturally based, and therefore not shared across cultures and educational systems.” Although the CCCC Statement does state that we should teach and reinforce expectations on citation and borrowing, it notes that students may not “philosophically grasp and perfectly execute these practices.” Part of this teaching and reinforcing should include a conversation that deals with this philosophical difference.

One website (D) did provide this, by having a resource specifically on Plagiarism and ESL writers. Unlike the other resources on plagiarism on the site, this one explained the rationale that American universities have developed against uncredited or gratuitous copying of others’ work from a cultural perspective, and engages with some of the literature by scholars such as Pat Currie and Alastair Pennycook, who have written much on the subject of ESL writers and plagiarism. While no one resource can speak to all perspectives, this discussion is a sign that writing centers are paying attention to the needs of their non-native English speaking students regarding plagiarism. Similar to website D, we should continue to present a more nuanced description of plagiarism to help our ESL students understand how plagiarism is embedded into Western culture.

Readability

None of the websites contain sentences that fall into the difficult category in terms of Flesch’s scale of readability. It seems that these writing centers have done a good job of making sure that their websites remain readable. Something to keep in mind is that these results are averages, so there

may be longer sentences in this sample that could be trimmed to increase readability.

SUMMARY

Based on this research, I recommend that WPAs across all contexts:

- take ESL students' intercultural needs into account and make space to address those needs in policy documents, whether they be in print or posted online;
- continue to hold conversations with department faculty regarding their departments' policies on sentence-level errors;
- create or locate resources tailored to ESL students' particular needs as noted in the extant scholarship. These should be in addition to grammar-based help;
- provide students with clearly labeled links to specific exercises and handouts, not direct them to broad websites with multiple links, which may be overwhelming;
- discuss plagiarism from a cultural perspective, noting the different ways that cultures view the borrowing of words and why, in particular, it is looked down upon in Western academic institutions;
- create documents that fall within the readability range that is appropriate for their students. Although 17 words per sentence is considered readable for the "average" reader, it might be necessary to use more or fewer words depending on student needs.

Limitations and Areas for Future Research

In this small study, I looked at the writing center websites of the eight American universities with the largest population of international students, as listed in the 2010–2011 Open Doors Data, published by the Institute of International Education ("Top 25"). Although ESL students have traditionally been seen only as international students, Harklau, Losey, and Seigal note that there are other populations of English Language Learners, such as Generation 1.5 students, with different needs than their international peers. Because it is difficult to identify Generation 1.5 students or other resident non-native speakers, this study does not take into account the various ways that writing centers may be developing their websites to meet the needs of these learners. There are opportunities for WPAs in such institutions who have more immediate knowledge of these students' needs to develop proper documents based on the criteria above. Given the large number of immigrant students at community colleges, it also makes sense to examine the

accessibility of webpages and web documents for NNES students at two year institutions.

There are also many opportunities to investigate the design usability of these websites as well. I have focused here mainly on the content that we produce for our ESL students, but it would be just as beneficial to study how closely our webspaces conform to usability standards in general. Although I have briefly touched on readability concerns, opportunities exist for exploring further issues dealing with alt text compliance, the use of headings and bullets, and proper alignment.⁶

Finally, it is important to note that ESL students are not monolithic. As Paul Kei Matsuda states, “The needs of ESL students differ from individual to individual and from institution to institution, and it is not possible to create one solution that fits all situations” (“Composition Studies” 717). Choices regarding website content are inherently rhetorical—that is, they require careful attention to the situated context within and constantly altering student bodies for which such decisions are made. Specific content and exercises may be needed in one geographic site to serve the needs of a particular community, but may be less important in another place. WPAs hoping to create more usable documents should perform usability testing. Krug’s text, *Rocket Surgery Made Easy*, is a sufficient, general place to begin and deals with the nuts and bolts of efficient, cost-effective methods for conducting usability tests. Many scholars in composition have also discussed the importance of usability testing from a rhetorical standpoint. Salvo, et al., for instance, focus on the collaborative aspects of redesigning the Purdue OWL to meet the needs of various stakeholders (108). Part of their goal in this project was to create a website that was not only user-friendly but also user-centered. Although the report focuses largely on the design aspect of the OWL, it may also help WPAs create usable documents in terms of content given the authors’ focus on reaching out to student constituents to determine the changes that need to be implemented online.⁷

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Debra Dew, the *WPA: Writing Program Administration*’s editorial board, and my two reviewers for their insightful feedback and for helping me to carve out a much clearer article from my original draft. I must also acknowledge Tony Silva, Michael Salvo, and Linda Bergmann for their encouragement and their assistance with finding resources for this study. Finally, I thank Jeff Koppmann for his countless readings of and responses to this article’s many inceptions over the course of a year.

NOTES

1. This survey lists the top 25 American universities with international student populations as reported by various educational organizations and associations across 746 institutions (Institute of International Education, “Fall 2011” 2).

2. There is not enough space to detail just how varied students who are labeled “ESL” truly are. Beyond those nuances that I bring up, there exist many other categorizations for students whose “first language” is not English. Many acronyms have been established that capture the wide array of teaching English to students. Aside from English as a Second Language (ESL) and Generation 1.5 students, there are also other classifications such as Second Language Learners (L2), English for Specific Purposes (ESP), English for Academic Purposes (EAP), English as an Additional Language (EAL), English as an International Language (EIL), English as a Second Dialect (ESD), English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) students, just to name a few. Time and space constraints do not permit me to discuss the nuances of each label, but it is important to note that each of these classifications was developed to describe the specific needs of a particular type of (English) Language Learner.

3. In an attempt to keep these sites as anonymous as possible in this study, I label them A-H, and refrain from quoting their pages verbatim to prevent hits on internet searches.

4. Indeed, because writing for international audiences assumes that readers do not share a similar language, organizations such as the International Organization for Standardization (ISO), recommend creating and using cross-culturally recognizable symbols to reduce confusion—in the ISO’s case, specifically for promoting safety in potentially hazardous situations. See www.clarionsafety.com for examples of safety warning labels developed with ISO standards.

5. As I have noted, many students come to American universities from countries where English is spoken as a second (or first) language. As a result, one can expect that several differences in vocabulary, style, and mechanics will have emerged between the English they speak and the English that we encounter in the United States. There is nothing deficient about these linguistic and lexical differences in that they are accepted in students’ home nations.

6. Jakob Nielsen, a usability expert, explains these and other practices for usability in various articles located on his site, <http://www.nngroup.com>.

7. The full OWL usability report is available at owl.english.purdue.edu/research/OWLreport.pdf.

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