

Articulation: The Community College Task In Teaching ESL Writing

ELIZABETH RODRIGUEZ

California State University, Sacramento

Cooperation is one key to successful articulation of ESL freshman composition courses between community colleges and state colleges. While cooperation means work by both parties, in this discussion, I will emphasize only the community college's part in improving articulation.

Teachers in both the two- and four-year institutions have access to and often use the current scholarly information and research from the recent decades of revolution on the teaching of composition. But, because the community colleges are bombarded by the many pressing needs of a student population with diverse needs, ordinary, logical steps for improving composition programs are sometimes not given first priority. Still, since the community college instructors know that their courses are accepted by the state universities as classes that satisfy the general education, composition requirement for the four-year degree, they are concerned whether their ESL students who complete "English IA equivalent" classes truly reflect freshman-level writing proficiency.

This problem of equivalency between community college freshman ESL composition classes and those of the universities becomes evident in the writing proficiency examination that all California State University colleges give to candidates for four-year degrees. Many ESL students are caught between schools with an astonishing gap separating their writing skills from the expectations of the universities. Indeed, upon transfer, some students need two or even three semesters of composition and reading instruction before they can pass a writing proficiency examination. As a teacher of some of the state college students who have somehow not met the writing test requirements and are not ready to write effectively in courses across the curriculum, on the job, and in their life pursuits, and as a community college instructor, I have some insights that would help community college ESL students improve their written communication. First, I will present a composite example of the unprepared transfer student.

The Unprepared Transfer Student

I call the student Robert, a name I have seen a Vietnamese male adopt for school records. Robert, an immigrant, was a student in one of my state university ESL composition classes. Although Robert had already been a university senior for two semesters, his bachelor's degree lay just beyond his reach, for, despite his wonderful successes in his major, Robert still could not pass the university's writing proficiency test, his only unfulfilled requirement for the degree. To earn his bachelor's degree, he had followed the appropriate procedures in a definite order. He completed all his English requirements in a community college, and when he entered the state university, he studied his major subject with great concentration. Then, in his senior year, when he took the writing proficiency test, he failed, a totally surprising result for him. Hadn't his previous school told him, after he had taken eight community college ESL courses, that he should be ready to complete his education with no further English courses? Certainly, he had not been mistaken. Nonetheless, upon investigating his failure, he found that the courses he had taken had not lived up to the promises that had been made to him. With resignation, he finally signed up for the writing course to which he was assigned through the university's testing of his English, two levels below freshman composition. And, during his third semester as a senior, he enrolled in my ESL writing class, one level below freshman composition. I found that, despite having credit for freshman composition from a community college and despite one composition course at the university, Robert had not yet learned to structure his essay so that it would clearly communicate to a reader. Instead, Robert discussed one point thoughtfully but abstractly, then deliberately switched to a new point, and then back to the first one.

At that time, even after repeated testing, he had not passed the writing test, and the cost of school was becoming an ever greater burden for him. Frequently, he came to class dressed in a suit, tie and white shirt, immaculately ready for a job interview. I began to wonder whether he would ever finish school, whether his strength, courage, and money for education would hold out, or whether the quick dollar from some employer would seize him before he completed his writing requirements. I would like to be able to say that I was the writing teacher who made the difference for this student. However, today, in a crowd of students in predicaments similar to Robert's, I have lost track of the particular student who suggested this composite. But, a stream of Roberts, one by one, each a real individual with demanding, even overwhelming needs, continues to take my ESL composition classes.

Suggestions for Improving ESL Writing Programs

I now want to make some simple suggestions that might help such ESL writing students, suggestions already successfully practiced in a number of community college ESL programs.

For the many community college ESL teachers who see articulation as a pressing priority, a few steps could be helpful in structuring a goal-oriented ESL writing program. At first, these suggestions seem simple and readily apparent, but ESL instructors who examine their college catalogs, schedules, course outlines, and syllabi for classes may be surprised to find incomplete or uncoordinated units in their writing programs.

A Sequenced Series of Courses

First, in the best of all circumstances, the community college ESL writing programs should have a series of four or five courses. Developing writing skills takes time. And, the courses should be sequenced such that each course is more challenging than the preceding one and such that students at each level have more writing experiences and/or practice than those in the preceding course. The sequencing should be specified in the course outlines.

Writing Essays, Not Just Paragraphs

Second, in these community college writing courses, students should be writing essays, as opposed to paragraphs. The essay gives students a chance to think about complexities and a context in which to make ideas meaningful. And, of course, when students reach the more advanced levels of English the longer unit with richly developed and complex ideas is the goal. The student who is ready to write paragraph length assignments is probably ready to write those paragraphs as part of an essay. The writing of essays should be a requirement in the three or four courses prior to freshman composition, and the requirement should be specified in the course outlines.

Use of a Revision System

Third, the use of a revision system in writing classes is effective for the development of ideas, for good organization, and for eliminating problems in syntax, diction, and usage. By revision system, I mean a planned rewriting of each essay. With the least experienced college writers, instructors might ask for two successive revisions of essays: a global revision for changes from the students' original ideas and organization and a local revision to eliminate other problems such as grammar and punctuation errors. Many instructors use an overlapping assignment system such that students turn in an essay every week at the same time that the teacher returns the previous week's essays. With the collection of each local revision, the instructor

adds a new assignment to keep the exchange of essays constant throughout the composition course. Under such a revision system, both students and teachers recognize how students' skills grow. Course outlines should suggest that teachers use a form of revision.

Use of Grading Criteria and Norming

Fourth, grading criteria should be part of the course outline for each level. The criteria should describe the proficiency required in major components of essay writing, listing for each level graduated standards of quality for (a) content appropriate to the essay; (b) organization and coherence; (c) diction; (d) structure; and (e) grammar and usage. Some method of norming essays to the criteria is also necessary. Establishing standards and following them is all important. At the 1991 CATESOL State Conference, one presenter suggested that writing courses should have two sets of criteria, one for at home writing and one for in-class writing. However, one set per class level may be sufficient because instructors who want to set up special criteria within a level can simply spell those writing standards out in their assignments.

Focus on Integrated Writing and Reading

Fifth, once a student reaches fluency in English, reading and writing should be integrated. Many instructors use multiple readings to lead to one essay, which then serves as the test of students' reading comprehension, vocabulary growth, critical thinking, and writing. So, the instructors assign grades on the basis of the essays, and the students read to write and write to read. Course outlines should permit the integration of reading and writing in at least the four most advanced levels of community college ESL writing courses.

A Writing Lab for Individualization

Finally, many ESL writing programs would do well to have a writing lab course to help students through individualized instruction and to show students how complex and demanding the task of learning to write is. The teacher-taught, individualized, self-paced, variable unit course, would be open to students whether or not they were enrolled in other ESL writing classes. In the class, students would work with the teacher to determine appropriate materials and activities, receiving from one half to three units based on attendance and work completed. Students in the lab course would get most of their instruction on writing from the regular ESL writing classes, but the lab course would be a place to overcome students' individual writing difficulties.

Problems with some items on my list call for a little explanation. The sequencing of courses seems so obvious that instructors some-

times assume that everyone knows that there is sequencing, what it is, and how it works. I would argue that such an assumption is false. The appropriateness of writing complete essays instead of paragraphs is debated. Instructors think that paragraph writing is easier on the teacher and on the student. But my own experience has shown me that writing paragraphs is an artificial task that denies students the pleasure of relating thought to thought in an essay and it is actually labor intensive for the teacher. When my students have written the one paragraph unit, I tend to use a one-day turn around, which means that I must mark paragraphs, record grades, return papers, and accept revisions in a whirlwind of repeated collecting and returning during every class period, whereas when my students write essays, I extend marking time to one week, with the result that I receive more writing with fewer processings. So essays are actually easier to work with. Moreover, because of their complexity of thought, essays make more interesting reading for the teacher. Obviously the instructor can teach paragraph structure and enrichment within the larger context, the essay.

Although there are debatable issues throughout, my list is meant to serve as a suggestion of what community colleges might consider as they coordinate the parts of a writing program to form a whole. And, that coordinated program will form a vital part of the articulation plans for community college and state university composition courses. ■