The ever-increasing multilingual student population at Boise State, as at most colleges across the nation, is creating a wonderfully diverse atmosphere on campus. Alongside the virtues of a diverse campus, however, come some unique learning issues for these students and pedagogical issues for faculty.

The national organization of college writing instructors, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, has addressed these issues in a position statement urging college personnel to "recognize the regular presence of second-language learners . . ., to understand their characteristics, and develop instructional and administrative practices that are sensitive to their linguistic and cultural needs." (See the full text of the CCCC position statement.)

As a means of supporting and integrating non-native English speaking students into academic life, Boise State currently offers three programs:

- The Intensive English Program provides an intensive 20 hours a week of English instruction for students who plan to enroll in classes at Boise State.
- Adult Basic Education provides classes that Boise State students are eligible to take but that are usually at beginning and intermediate levels.
- ESL academic writing courses (ENGL121, 122, 123) are offered at the pre-English 101 level.

Gail Shuck, our new ESL coordinator, joined the Boise State faculty in Fall 2001 as Assistant Professor of English, specializing in English as a Second Language. She teaches ESL academic writing at the first-year level and also teaches upper-division and graduate courses in applied linguistics. Her primary goal is to help students a
well as faculty and staff to understand the complexity of writing and speaking more than one language and to recognize and value the knowledge that multilingual students bring to the entire community. (See the bio of Gail Shuck.)

A Brief Case Study

One of the biggest problems faculty members face is the integration of ESL students into their classrooms. It is thus important to understand learning from the point of view of the student. The following is a writing sample from one ESL student, along with some analysis of that writing. This excerpt is from an unedited essay written for an English 123 class by a native speaker of Japanese. The assignment was to write an exploration of the students’ own language use. This student chose to write about “two different writers” who co-exist in his mind as he writes in English.

When I write essays and journals as English composition assignments, I sometimes wonder who wrote my papers because there are some conflicts of ideas in them. I think these conflicts are not because of only lack of English knowledge such as grammar mistakes. Even though I write essays by myself, it seems that two different writers compose my papers without negotiations. One writer seems to be often modest and conservative toward new things, but another does not. I had never experienced these kinds of contradictions before I learned a second language. After considering why my essays look like as two different writers wrote, I supposed that I changed the ways of thinking… [italics added]

The excerpt represents an issue of multiple and shifting language identities common to many multilingual students. Instructors may not be aware that the experience of writing for many non-native English speakers is quite different from the experience of native English speakers.

Some features of the writing itself are worth examining. It is helpful to think of them not as "mistakes," but as evidence of how a non-native speaker struggles with the difficulties of the English language -- evidence, indeed, of the knowledge they do have about English writing that allows them to make what are actually sophisticated guesses. Note the italicized segments. Of these, only one, the “mistake” without a superscript number, is clearly ungrammatical: “another” should be “the other,” because the mention of two writers in the previous sentence means that “other” must refer to only one possible referent; therefore, the definite article (the) is required. The brief comments below explain the rest of the italicized portions. A detailed analysis explains the student's knowledge about both his first and his second language that led him to choose these expressions.
1. *Confictions* is a real form of the word *conflict*, according to the American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition. He found it in another dictionary and had no reason to suspect that it was not used by most Americans.

2. *Such as grammar mistakes*: Because he is attempting to illustrate his “lack of English knowledge,” he uses “such as” to introduce “grammar mistakes.” And why wouldn't he? The problem could be that a lack of knowledge is abstract, while grammar mistakes are the concrete manifestation of that lack of knowledge—not exactly the same as an example of a lack. See the detailed analysis for another interpretation.

3. The problem with *without negotiations* is that it sounds awkward to our native English speaker's verb-oriented ear. We might expect this: “…two writers compose my papers *without negotiating*.” The other problem seems to be that we don't know whether the two writers are supposed to be negotiating with each other, with the words, or with some other party—perhaps the real, non-metaphorical student himself. His own account of how long he struggled with that phrase is available in the detailed analysis.

4. In the noun phrase *the ways of thinking*, we are not sure whose ways of thinking were changed, although the rest of the paper tells us that he changed his own. To clarify whose ways of thinking he is referring to (there's that nasty dangling preposition!), native English speakers would change this noun phrase to a simple noun—*ways*—and add a relative clause: *[that] I think*. As in excerpt #3, the difference between the more noun-oriented Japanese structure and the more verb-oriented English structure becomes clear and explains his use of the noun phrase.

As you see from the complexity of this segment, an instructor's request that he “clean up” the grammar would fail to address the knowledge that this student has that led him to make quite sophisticated, if awkward, choices—choices that are not entirely related to English sentence structure.

**Forming realistic expectations**

What levels of English competence can instructors reasonably expect from their non-native-English students? Here are three principles to help us approach non-native speakers' writing.

- Certain ESL errors are going to persist no matter how long a student has known English or how proficient the student becomes. A commonly cited struggle non-native speakers have is the use of articles. The article system in the English language is only similar to that in a few languages in the world, and even in those few cases, the rules are not identical. Even as
native speakers, we make decisions about whether to use "a" or "the" in a given situation depending on how much we think the audience knows about the noun at hand. Therefore, if there is no single correct answer, it is not reasonable to expect non-native speakers to make the same kinds of subtle distinctions.

- Instructors have to think about what it means to do quality work in college. A student can have an extremely critical and analytical approach to a topic, revealing high levels of complexity and sophistication of thought, and still have missing articles, incorrect tenses, and a variety of other indications of their non-native status.

- Instructors should be patient with second language learners and understand that what may take a native speaker two hours to write may take some nonnative speakers up to 12 hours to write, revise, and revise again. Asking them to have their work edited by someone else is not a solution. First, students don't learn from it because they are not actively involved in the revision/editing process. Second, outside editors (including roommates, classmates, and tutors) frequently compromise the students' academic integrity. Most editors simply make corrections without consulting the student about what he or she really meant. Furthermore, as in the case study above, the "errors" often indicate much larger relationships between ideas—relationships that the editor is not prepared to deal with—such that it becomes impossible for a teacher to know how much of the final product belongs to the student and how much to the editor.

**Some useful teaching strategies**

When instructors adapt their teaching for multilingual students, even a little, they are not just accommodating a small segment of the class: they are making their courses more accessible to all students. The strategies on which ESL teachers frequently rely, such as using more visual support or pausing in appropriate places so students have time to absorb the language, are also effective in mainstream classes, allowing everyone increased opportunities for comprehension.

- Rephrase important instructions or concepts that may be misunderstood on first hearing. For example, the distinction between /l/ and /r/ is very difficult for even the most proficient native speakers of Japanese and can mean that such students will not hear the difference between “correct your homework” and “collect your homework.” If you say, “Correct your homework by tomorrow,” try adding, “…so when I pick these up tomorrow, I can see that you’ve fixed your mistakes (or revised your work, etc.).”

- Provide examples of effective language in particular assignments. This
may mean asking students for permission to use their work in later semesters as examples and keeping a file of such sample assignments, or it may mean making a simple handout with useful verbs (e.g., “argues,” “suggests,” “implies”) used in sample sentences.

- Highlight not only important concepts and terms but also important relations between ideas. If you are illustrating a previous point, for example, highlight the illustration—indeed, that the subsequent sentence IS an illustration—by saying, “Here’s an example,” and then pausing rather than “for instance,” which is harder to catch. If you are making cause-and-effect connections, use your voice to emphasize words such as “causes,” “results from,” etc.
- When you are reading students' work, a little patience goes a long way. A mistake such as “another” instead of "the other" in the case study is not difficult to understand.

**The future of ESL at Boise State**

The ESL program at Boise State is currently developing programs and workshops that will not only help non-native English speakers have a successful college experience, but also help faculty to learn more about what they can do to ensure that success.

- A series of faculty workshops is being planned to help increase understanding of second language issues.
- An ESL internship program is planned to start up in Spring 2003. The program will place students with training in teaching English as a second language into courses around the university to provide specific language support for non-native English speaking students. Instructors who choose to participate will attend workshops and regular meetings with both student interns and ESL specialists to identify specific needs of non-native speakers as well as instructional strategies for integrating multilingual students into the classroom. Further information will be forthcoming.
- The English Department has also instituted a biannual conference on language learning with presentations by multilingual students on such topics as bilingual, bicultural identity, language discrimination, and the difficulties that English presents for non-native speakers. Response to this conference so far has been very positive. Increasing numbers of faculty, administrators, staff, and students will be encouraged to attend in coming semesters.

**Key ESL resources**

- Gail Shuck, Assistant Professor of English (ESL), 426-1189
- Boise State Faculty Advising Guide (call Gail Shuck for a copy)

- Purdue OWL [http://owl.english.purdue.edu/](http://owl.english.purdue.edu/)
This site offers an online writing lab (OWL), which addresses various types of writing as well as technical questions. If the answer is not found there, the lab will respond to email requests for more information. They also have a section titled "Handouts for Students and Teachers." It is in this section that ESL is addressed. They also offer online workshops and presentations for subjects such as Conquering the Comma, Writing the Literary Analysis, and Organizing Your Argument, as well as many others.

- Advice on Academic Writing [http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/advise.html](http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/advise.html)
This site has information for both native English speakers as well as non-native English speakers. Their subjects include:

  General Advice on Academic Essay Writing
  Using Thesis Statements
  Revising the Essay
  Developing Coherent Paragraphs
  Critical Reading Toward Critical Writing
  Content Analysis as a Research Method
  How Not to Plagiarize
  Specific Types of Writing
  Style and Editing
  Using the Computer to Improve your Writing
  Grammar and Punctuation.

This site has information for teaching and learning English. Topics include:

  Business English
  Grammar
  Quizzes & Tests
  Test Your English
  Reading, Writing, Spelling, and Vocabulary
  Listening, Speaking, Pronunciation
  Art, History, Law, Math, Museums, Newspapers, Politics,
  Religion, Science, Transportation, and Travel

- Dave’s ESL Café – for students who want to practice their English [http://www.pacificnet.net/~sperling/eslcafe.html](http://www.pacificnet.net/~sperling/eslcafe.html)
This site offers a message board for ESL students and teachers from around the world. It also has an important link to English language training for just about every conceivable language.
Gail is, of course, the principal resource when anyone has questions about ESL. The Advising Guide, newly developed, pulls together the resources on campus to which advisors can direct their advisees who are non-native-speakers. A version for faculty was sent out in the fall, and a version for ESL students is nearing completion. Please ask Gail if you need a new copy of the Faculty Advising Guide. The Web sites provide a huge, rich variety of sources where non-native-speaking students can find information on the English language, play language games, and interact with other non-native speakers.