

# ***The Impact of ESL Writers' Prior Writing Experience on Their Writing in College***

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What is “college-level” writing? Why is it so elusive to define? As demonstrated by the contributors to the first volume of this book series, one explanation is that the requirements and expectations of many writing assignments in college are context specific (Sullivan and Tinberg). To further complicate the situation, the training in writing that students receive in their previous educational contexts varies, too, which may present a real challenge to college teachers and students alike. On the one hand, students’ prior writing experience equips them with necessary skills that help them become more proficient writers; on the other hand, it leaves students with diverse preconceptions about academic writing, which may cause them problems when the old assumptions conflict with new expectations. For the significant number of ESL students enrolled in colleges and universities in the United States, this challenge tends to be more salient because of their more diverse cultural, educational, and linguistic backgrounds. In this essay, I first explain the impact of ESL students’ prior writing experience on their writing in college and the necessity of looking into their previous writing training, and then I introduce a writing assignment that has helped me learn more about my students’ writing history when I teach ESL writing at a public university in the United States. Finally, I provide pedagogical suggestions for using the information collected from students about their writing experience and helping students construct this assignment.

## **ESL Writers and Their Writing Experience**

In recent years, the number of college-level ESL writers in the United States has been increasing rapidly. As noted in a statement issued by the Conference on College Composition and Communication, these ESL writers, including refugees, and international visa students, as well as permanent residents and citizens who have received at least part of their precollege education in the United States or Canada, can be found not only in basic writing or first-year composition programs but also in professional writing and writing across the curriculum programs (669). Since ESL writers have to write in a language that is not their native language and are often judged by readers who might not share their cultural backgrounds, value systems, or criteria of “good writing,” they tend to be disadvantaged in academic contexts. Therefore, in addition to the challenges of learning a new language, ESL writers “may have special needs because the nature and functions of discourse, audience, and persuasive appeals often differ across linguistic, cultural and educational contexts” (670). To better address ESL students’ special needs and help them become more proficient English writers, it is necessary for writing teachers to get to know their students: not only their cultural and educational backgrounds in general but also the specific writing training that ESL students have been exposed to because students from similar backgrounds may not necessarily share exactly the same writing experience (Matsuda 53).

Writing is a social entity; learning to write in a new language encompasses more than just the ability to use grammar and vocabulary appropriately in that language. A more challenging aspect of writing is that the values and conventions of literacy can vary across cultures, contexts, and disciplines; therefore, to teachers of ESL writers, it is

essential to first find out their students' existing literacy assumptions by examining their prior writing experience.

First, ESL students' writing experience in their first languages (L1) plays a significant role in shaping their perceptions of the expectations and purposes of their writing in a second language (L2). Although ESL writers with more L1 writing experience usually tend to have more writing strategies at their disposal, and therefore tend to be more proficient in L2 writing (Cumming; Kobayashi and Rinnert; Sasaki; Sasaki and Hirose; Zainuddin and Moore), not all strategies are compatible with the expectations of the L2 academic contexts. ESL writers, especially those who are veteran writers in their native languages but novice writers in English, may assume that models of their L1 writing can be transferred to L2 writing without being aware that literacy notions such as criteria of "good" writing, approaches to certain genres (personal, argumentative, or narrative, for example), or even attitudes toward texts can be culturally varied and culturally specific (Basham, Ray, and Whalley; Bell; Dong; Li; Phung; Purves; Reichelt; Soter). Therefore, ESL writers' bilingual or multilingual identities and educational experiences cannot be ignored.

Based on my own teaching experience, I have learned how basic concepts such as having a thesis or supporting main ideas with specifics in academic writing can be problematic to novice ESL writers. For instance, a student from Taiwan, who immigrated to the United States when she was a sophomore in college, once wrote about her understanding and attitude of the "American style" of writing and how she had struggled to see the significance of a thesis in English writing: "It sounded ridiculous to me to have a thesis statement and emphasize this thesis in each single paragraph, which seems that

writers apparently think their readers are not smart enough to follow what they are trying to express. It didn't make sense to me." Similarly, another student from the United Arab Emirates shared with me, in a study I conducted, the painful efforts she took in order to see what being "specific and straightforward" means in English writing, because writing in Arabic, her native language, is different: "In Arabic, you don't have to be specific. When you write, your writing can have different meanings, it can be interpreted differently. You use a lot of metaphors, it doesn't matter if you don't understand it. You can interpret it in your own way, you can establish a new idea. You don't have to have a conclusion" (Zhang, "Task" 64–65). The ESL students in both cases were strong L1 writers, and, probably because of that, the conflicts between the new expectations in L2 writing and the well-established notions of writing derived from their L1 writing appeared to have incurred even more confusion and frustration.

Second, as diverse as their L1 writing experience is, ESL writers' L2 writing training contributes to their various conceptualizations of academic writing, too. For instance, some of them may have attended high school in the United States, some have studied in language institutes in the United States before enrolling in college, some have studied in English-medium international schools back in their home country, and some have studied in their local high schools where English is not greatly emphasized. As a result, when it comes to English writing, ESL writers have been exposed to different genres, the level of their involvement in a particular genre differs, and their approaches to similar writing tasks can be different.

Just like their L1 writing experience, ESL writers' diverse L2 writing experiences exert a great impact on the way they construct their writing assignments in college (Allen;

Hamp-Lyons; Zhang “ESL”): Is audience analysis really necessary? What role can personal perspectives or experience play in academic writing (are they compatible with each other)? What does “respond to and integrate your reading material” mean when you write? These questions might seem simple and straightforward to writing teachers, but ESL students may come up with a variety of answers and responses. For example, Allen’s study of a Japanese L2 writer illustrates how prior L2 experience with using citations can influence ESL writers’ perception of and approach to a task. The ESL student in that study learned from a previous teacher the significance of supporting her argument with source information, which made her believe that she had to “have a reference to ANYTHING” (83), so she chose to sacrifice her own ideas when there were no references available to support them. As the researcher observes, the writer’s “overriding concern with referencing had prohibited her from elaborating and hence progressing with her writing” (84).

Third, as college students, ESL writers not only write for composition classes but also for content courses in their major or minor areas; since the requirements for writing assignments in these areas are usually discipline specific and different from course to course, it is especially critical for ESL students to be sensitive to any new expectations or guidelines and wisely use their writing strategies accumulated from previous writing contexts. Since most English or writing classes that ESL students take in precollege or college contexts focus on general language or academic skills, many ESL writers are not prepared to write for new, specific discourse communities, or to be able to “express their knowledge about academic subject matter in modes of English writing appropriate to the academic discipline and tasks assigned” (Cummins, Erdosy, and Cumming 69). As

Harris illustrates in her article, an A student in an advanced composition course can struggle desperately to “GET TO THE POINT” in one of his writing assignments for his engineering class (121–122). As an ESL writing teacher, I have learned how angry and frustrated students can be when, after many years of (successful, for some) English study, they are regarded as bad writers by professors from other disciplines based on criteria that they have never heard of before.

Because ESL writers’ diverse prior writing experiences may impact the way they interpret and perceive writing assignments in new academic contexts it can be more difficult for them to adjust to the various expectations from one context to another. As a writing teacher, I believe the first step to helping these students is to learn more about them: their previous writing experiences, especially their implicit assumptions of literacy. Only in this way can writing teachers better address students’ individual needs and at the same time understand and do justice to the variations demonstrated in students’ work. Since each writer is a unique individual with different cultural, educational, and writing backgrounds (Matsuda 53), the best way to achieve this is to let students tell their own stories as writers. Therefore, I present a writer’s autobiography assignment that allows me to know more about my students’ literacy history.

### **Writer’s Autobiography**

When I teach English 106I (first-year composition for ESL students) at a public university in the U.S. Midwest, the first paper I usually assign is the writer’s autobiography, in which students write the stories of their development as writers. The university where I teach has one of the highest enrollments in the United States of

international students. For the 2007–2008 academic year, it had an enrollment of nearly five thousand international students from 123 countries; 424 of those were first-year students. Generally, there are eight sections of English 106I each semester, with a maximum of fifteen students in each section. Because the university sets a high threshold for English proficiency in its international undergraduate students, most students in my English 106I class are high-intermediate or advanced ESL learners in terms of both their TOEFL scores and their oral communication skills. However, like most ESL students in the United States, these students have received varying levels of pre-university training in English writing as a result of their diverse educational backgrounds.

Following is the assignment introduction that is distributed to students.

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## **ENGLISH 106I**

### **FIRST YEAR COMPOSITION**

#### **Writer's Autobiography Assignment**

In a paper of 750–1000 words, write the story of your development as a writer—in both your native and second or foreign language(s). Consider your entire life, including preschool years, and do not limit yourself to school experiences.

Below are some areas of your experience to consider:

- people who influenced your writing
- memories of successes and failures in writing
- your attitudes toward writing (positive or negative, and why)
- your strengths and weaknesses in writing
- kinds of writing you have done
- in-class or out-of-class activities to guide or facilitate your writing

You need not write about all of these areas or follow this order in your paper; the purpose of thinking about these topics is to help you recover relevant memories. You need not address these areas with the same level of detail, either.

Although the assignment asks you to focus on your *writing* history, you might have to include certain experiences that do not explicitly relate to writing but provide a context for those experiences.

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For many students, this assignment allows them to view themselves as “writers” for the first time in their lives, despite the fact that they have produced numerous writings before. By recollecting and sharing their writing experiences, students take more pride in their literacy history and therefore gain more confidence in their writing skills. As for me, I learn more about each student through this assignment, both as a writer and as a person.

### **Sample Student Essays**

The first sample essay was written by Mohamed, a first-year student in computer engineering. Based on student information collected at the beginning of the course, I knew he came from the United Arab Emirates and was a native speaker of Arabic. He came to study in the United States after finishing high school when he was about eighteen years old. Before his enrollment in college, he studied in an intensive English language program in Philadelphia for one year. As Mohamed wrote in the essay, his precollege English writing experiences were quite limited in high school back in his home country, but as a writer he benefited greatly from his one-year study in Philadelphia.



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## Mohamed's Essay

Being a writer is like being a river: the more a river takes substances and materials from its surroundings, the stronger it gets, for such materials provide the river with a stronger ability to flow. Eventually, the river ends up with throwing all what it has inside to the huge and open ocean. Those materials become a bond between the river and the ocean. Similarly, a writer gets more efficient by collecting experiences. With more experiences, a writer would have more intensive emotions to eventually burst them up to people as pieces of paper, which become an eternal bond between the writer and the readers.

As a person who is fond of writing, I had many experiences in this field. Initially, I started to know writing from my brother, who is a great writer in my opinion. So, being impressed by him, I started trying to write my own stories. Gradually, my Arabic teacher came to notice my writing abilities, and assigned me to the head of the literature activities club in elementary school. Moving on to high school, I continued my journey in the writing realms, but from different approaches. At some point in my life, I had to learn for the first time to write in English, which was a very minor issue in my school years. Thus, I became to realize more facts and face tougher challenges in my life.

First of all, before I got to know writing, I was an avid reader. I always went to different libraries and book fairs with my father, searching for every single children's book. Also, I enjoyed watching Japanese animation that contained lots of complex story structures. However, I never thought, at that time of my life, of creating my own stories, until my brother did. He was always considered as the creative member in our family, for he enjoyed writing the most. Thus, I began to have a particular interest in his writings, and also in the idea of writing itself. I tried at the beginning to write something serious and dramatic, just like my brother. But, I couldn't find my way out of the first line; I simply

couldn't use the words I have learnt to truly express myself. Fortunately, that wasn't the end, for one day in my elementary school, I received a twenty out of twenty, for the first time ever, in my Arabic essay class. After that class, the teacher asked me to come with him privately, in order to praise me! At those moments of praise, I was simply petrified, for the first step of my newly-born dream has been successfully done.

From that day, I felt more acquainted with writing, especially in the comedy part of writing. I used to write some excessively sarcastic stories to my friends, about some fantasy adventures. Frankly, they love reading those stories very much. Also, my Arabic essay teacher assigned me to the head of the newly formed literature activities club. In terms of writing, my life seemed an absolute perfection, at that time of my life. However, this living dream didn't continue forever, for as soon as I reached junior school, my writing path has drifted away; my new essay teacher in my new school was simply inactive. Even though he was a good teacher, he always ignored the class's suggestions to do any kind of activity, and neither did he care of forming a literature club at all. Also, my new classmates were different, for many students lose their innocent spirits as they get to junior school in my country, and consequently, their interest in reading and writing. In other words, I didn't get enough support from my surroundings, which were my guides in writing in elementary school. Thus, I began to lose my passion for writing, even though I continued to read more than ever. I felt like wherever I searched for some words to express within my heart, I trembled upon the ashes that were left by the fire.

Years have passed, and I was done from my high school with tremendous scientific success, when the time has arrived to provide me with even tougher writing experiences. After finishing high school, the president's office of scholarships in my country offered me to go to the USA for university studies. At the beginning, I hesitated very much to accept such a risky adventure, for I lived my whole life in my country. However, after lots of thinking and meditation, I finally decided to go over the seas, for

such challenging task might force me to recall the fire within my soul. Everything was arranged, and it was time to begin my English Language Programs in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Before going to Philadelphia, my English writing experiences were very limited, for the education of the English language itself in my country is weak. For example, to write an essay, we used to memorize some specific paragraphs from our textbooks in order to “copy” them in a ten line essay. The best combination applied from those paragraphs earns a full mark immediately. Thus, even though I used to get full marks in those “essays”, I never really experienced even the basics of English writing skills, for memorization is way far from that. Consequently, for me, Philadelphia represents an ultimate challenge that I’ll never forget in my life, as it was the first place where I had to write real essays in English.

Initially, I wasn’t very scared or intimidated by this idea, for I thought it would be easy to apply my previous writing skills again, although in a different language. Besides, my English vocabulary wasn’t bad at all, and consequently, I thought that, with some more concentration, I would be able to impress my English teachers in the same way as my elementary Arabic teacher. However, even though I finally managed to write with the same old passion, the results were ultimately different; in my first paper, negative comments from my teacher were almost per word. Simply, she told me that none of my ideas are expressed clearly. Furthermore, all my organizational skills in the paper are in a terrible shape. She even couldn’t understand the overall picture, for according to her, my writing is filled to the extreme with metaphors, awkward twists, and mysterious statements. In other words, my English teacher couldn’t grasp the ideas as my Arabic teacher did, and neither did I grasp the reasons behind such awful result at the beginning.

Thus, despair and regret began to grow within my soul gradually. I believed firmly at some point that my writing ability had vanished forever. However, a dear friend advised me to consult an essay tutor, or an advisor that might be able to help me realize the problems I have and solve them. So, moving on, I met an advisor, and that was one of the best things I ever did. That advisor, which I owe my writings improvement to her, was an angel that held me tightly, with lots of writing assignments, but with fruitful results. She identified my main problem, which was the poetic style of my writing. She told me that an evocative writing style, that I used to follow in my Arabic writings, doesn't work in the USA, because the American style of writing is linear. Americans want a very clear and specific kind of essay, without lots of twists and loops. Also, she volunteered to give me some of her own time in order to work on my writing as much as possible, all in friendly and humorous atmosphere. Even though my sessions with her were long and difficult, I still managed to persevere, for I felt the intensity in her care and support, like my elementary Arabic teacher. Sometimes, she tended to be harsh with her comments, but that affected me positively; those comments made me truly understand my mistakes and the reasons behind every single one of them. Day after day, I started to feel more encouraged and more confident than ever. I concluded my experience with this wonderful person, besides having an unforgettable memory, by two of the most valuable lessons ever.

First of all, I don't need to be a perfectionist writer all the time, and I should always accept negative comments on my writings. Instead of depression, I have to work on correcting my mistakes as hard as possible. So, I know now, thanks to her, that I can be a great writer, but not without faults. Another important lesson is that I can always improve upon my writings, either in Arabic or English, but I need to be always strong, and ready for the worst, not just in writing, but in all of my life aspects.

To sum up, even if a river has a tremendous energy and huge amounts of materials, it still can fail to throw its ingredients to the ocean, if it ever gives up in front of an obstacle. As long as there is a valley, a river would never stop flowing, no matter how many obstacles it faces, for it has the natural perseverance ability within its flow that would eventually enable it to fulfill its eternal duty.

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### **Analysis**

Even though, linguistically speaking, this essay is not one of the best I received in response to this assignment, I still consider it a strong paper. What I like most about it is its rich content and clear explanations: Mohamed, a first-semester student in computer engineering, shares with us his growth as a writer in both his first language, Arabic, and second language, English. With vivid details, he identifies the people who had inspired him, encouraged him, and helped him in his journey as a writer; at the same time, he highlights his achievements in Arabic writing and his initial struggles in ESL writing, as well as how he overcame the difficulties in ESL writing and the accompanying anxiety he experienced when he studied at a language institute in the United States.

More interestingly, as Mohamed unfolds the stories, he reveals his changing assumptions about English writing: At first he believed that it should work the same way as Arabic writing, but later, under the influence of one of his advisors, he viewed English writing as “linear” and straightforward, especially compared with Arabic writing, which is full of metaphors and “mysterious statements.” I have to admit that it was thanks to these stories that I was able to better appreciate this essay: Now I understand that the analogies at the beginning and the end of the essay, together with the metaphorical

language in the text (for instance, “I trembled upon the ashes that were left by the fire”) were not used randomly; they were rhetorical strategies Mohamed borrowed from his first language writing (which worked successfully in this case) to enhance the style and effectiveness of his essay. In addition, I also like the transitional signals in this essay that logically connected the different stories; all together, they built up the theme of the essay.

The second sample was written by Rahyu, who was an eighteen-year-old, first-semester student in computer science. A native Indonesian, Rahyu studied in an English-medium school for more than six years in Singapore before coming to the United States.

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#### **Rahyu’s Essay**

At the start of this semester, I have just started to learn how to write Chinese characters and the most I can write is three sentences of conversation and truthfully speaking, I felt perfectly happy with that. Thinking back now, I must have started with these types of assignments when I was little. I am sure, the feeling was the same, maybe even more. The happiness that I felt must have been overwhelming. Since when then, I felt a sense of laziness in writing?

I went to the same primary school which my siblings all went to. All of them are smart and they are very proficient in writing in Indonesian language. I guess, that was one of the reasons I started to dislike writing. Sometimes, I felt compared to my siblings, as the teachers have high expectation of me. The homework assigned everyday was of no help to lighten my feelings toward writing. Almost everyday, we were given compositions to write and sometimes, reading comprehensions to do. To write was just a chore for me that can bring no sense of enjoyment.

In fourth grade, I started learning English language. It was still the basics like “A is for ‘Apple’”. Different from learning Chinese, I felt no sense of achievements in learning this new language and there was nothing I could be proud of and at that time and I still did not value writing. I tried to write composition assignments as short as possible, enabling me to spend my time doing other things like playing game.

After my first year in secondary school, I was sent oversea to Singapore to continue my studies there. I attended language school for half a year to prepare myself so that I will be able to follow the lessons in Singapore which are delivered in English. It was then that, I struggled in writing compositions. I would receive only a pass grade for my English lessons. I felt helpless in my English class as I could not seem to catch with to my classmates in terms of quality or quantity in my writing. Expressing my thoughts in English was difficult. I seemed to run out of words and things to write about quickly. The things which I write about were mostly narratives. I remembered trying to write about a fantasy type narrative but I found out that such theme is not suitable for secondary school assignments. The theme will require a much longer range of words. A mere 350 words are not sufficient to cover the characters and storyline. My teachers advised me to stay back to write normal narrative compositions.

Next, in my junior college (Junior College is a high school level of institution in Singapore that consists of 2 years), my first year went pretty much the same. But in my second year, I had an excellent teacher. She was tireless in trying to help my classmates and me in improving ourselves. Also, it seems we also wanted to prove that we can do it to her. Most of the writing done during my Junior College life was either descriptive or argumentative types. She was very strict in marking and I have only passed once before with her marking my papers. She made her students undergo lots of practice. We were taught ways to start off a composition, how to write the contents of a paragraph and also we were told to read newspapers to get contents for what we are writing on. I guess she

was pretty influential in improving my writing ability as my final grade for 'A-level'(The name for the national final examination for Junior College) was B 3(between 65-69%). Also, at the beginning of the academic year, the passing rate at my class was 0% but towards the end, there was more than 70% passes. However, then, I still thought writing was unpleasant, it was just another thing that I had to do to get my grades in a class.

The only activity involving writing outside classes is chatting over the net. During my second year of Junior College, I started to explore the world of mIRC (internet relay chat) to download mangas (Japanese comics) and at the same time, I will chat there to relieve myself of my everyday chores. Overtime, I made lots of friends and we still chat with one another a lot even now. I personally prefer chatting online than to speak verbally in real life. There are many reasons for that, one of them is, I feel more confident when chatting because I am better at typing than I am at pronouncing words. Also, I do not feel restricted when I am chatting there. Moreover, I do not need to keep up an image in there, the truth is, personally I think the worse a person's image is there, the more fun it is to chat with him.

However, there is one person who has greatly influenced me that, now, I like to write and express myself in what I write. His website, where he put his blog (internet journal) has lightened my feelings. He was so open about his life, no shame in whatever ridiculous things that he had done. Thus, I started to follow what he did. I made a website of my own and there, I posted my experiences in lives. Although, I am not as shameless as he is, that is, I am still selective in doing ridiculous things in life. I started to take pride in writing and expressing myself. I feel as if it feels good to share with the world about myself, and I just hope they enjoy it too. Most of my new experiences are written and this habit of writing my experiences is also useful to recount about things that I have done and enjoyed. One of the best thing about it is of course, I do not have a due date of when I should express what I feel.



I feel like a child again, to start with baby steps and feel an accomplishment. My true writing career has just started, I will have many more opportunities to express my feelings to everyone. Now that I am in D University, I sure hope that I will have many pleasant experiences here that will add up to my writing experiences.

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### **Analysis**

In this essay, Rahyu focuses on his attitude toward writing when telling the story of his development as a writer. He honestly admits that, despite his years of precollege training in English writing, he is not a strong writer in English, partially due to his overall negative attitude toward academic writing—but his attitude seems to be changing, thanks to his interest in online chatting and blogging. Overall, I consider this essay acceptable: It is well focused and humorous in tone, but some points are not fully developed or explained. For instance, I would love to see more illustrations or explanations about the kinds of English writing assignments he had back home and more analysis of the difficulties he encountered when he was studying in Singapore. Once again, his attitude toward academic writing might have played a role in this, as the two paragraphs about online chatting and blogging are more detailed and vivid. Also, the essay contains many short, choppy sentences; it will run more smoothly if he can improve the sentence structures.

The two sample essays each have their own weaknesses, and like most ESL writing, they both contain grammar and punctuation errors. On the other hand, both essays follow the instructions of the assignment and fulfill its basic requirements: They focus on a central idea, which is the development of the authors' writing skills, and this

central idea has been reasonably developed in both essays (although some points in Rahyu's essay could have been more fully elaborated). The essays are not error free, but the errors are minor and do not interfere with comprehension. For me, these features make them decent college-level essays, especially considering that writing is a developmental process, and both writers were first-year students in college. As they grow as writers in the years to come, I hope they can learn to better monitor errors in their writing and construct more varied sentence patterns. In addition, since the requirements of college-level writing may differ from genre to genre (for instance, narrative and non-narrative) and from discipline to discipline, they should also learn to be sensitive to the rhetorical context of all of their writing assignments.

As illustrated by the two samples, the writer's autobiography provides ESL students an opportunity to share their personal and cultural values of academic writing—and very often, the assignment makes the idea of writing itself less threatening. At the same time, it serves as an excellent source of information for writing teachers. For instance, I learned from Mohamed's essay that the prior writing experiences of ESL students can help them enrich their writing strategies when used appropriately, but, on the other hand, those experiences can also conflict with the expectations in new academic contexts. Rahyu's essay told me how complicated and internationalized ESL students' writing experiences can be: It may not be limited to their home country and the United States—a third or fourth country can be involved. Thus, generalizations about educational or writing backgrounds based on student nationalities may not provide accurate, useful information for teachers. Moreover, when it comes to the positive influence of prior writing experience, although the years and kinds of training are

generally positively correlated to students' writing proficiency, their personal interests, attitudes, and agency cannot be ignored.

### **Tips for Teachers**

First, can the rich information about ESL students' writing history inform our teaching in a more direct way? My answer is yes. For example, one of the topics many students reflect on in this assignment is the differences between English and their L1 writing. As researchers suggest, this awareness of differences may help ESL writers cope with the difficulties of English writing (Kobayashi and Rinnert 116). Therefore, if time allows, teachers can encourage discussion of this topic in class. In addition to in-depth conversations in conferences with individual students (especially those who have brought up this topic in their papers), small-group or class discussions work well, too. Some ESL students, driven by their determination to succeed in the United States, are willing and ready to make adjustments to their educational approaches to conform to the "norm" of English writing. Others, intending to stay in the United States either temporarily or permanently, would like to keep the rhetorical practices that help define their identities.

For teachers, it would be insensitive to suggest to students that skills expected in the new academic setting are superior; however, we can remind them that successful writing strategies in their first languages may not work the same way in English writing, and sometimes, with this in mind, they can write successful English essays without losing their rhetorical identities. Take Mohamed's case: As he realizes in his essay, too many unexplained, mysterious metaphors in English writing may cause confusion or even

misunderstanding among readers; on the other hand, when used in an appropriate context, well-thought metaphors can add to the originality and flavor of English writing.

Second, it is noteworthy to point out that, although this assignment may seem to be a straightforward narrative essay, it may sometimes turn out to be problematic. For instance, the word *autobiography* in the assignment title prompts some students to tell stories about their personal lives or to provide too much information about their writing history (that is, on their language learning in general) instead of concentrating on their experiences as writers. Therefore, when introducing the assignment, teachers should emphasize that this is an autobiography about *writing*. I find that brainstorming first in small groups and then as a whole class is a helpful strategy to allow students to see what stories or experiences are relevant to this assignment—and thus keep them on the right track. Another common problem with this assignment is that students may only briefly touch on, or simply list, relevant writing experiences without further details or highlights. A useful strategy for me is to ask them to do an in-class writing like this:

What is the most striking/unforgettable memory/feeling/experience to you as a writer (either writing in your native language or foreign language)? Write for about 15 minutes. Please provide as many specifics as possible.

After students finish the writing, I usually invite some of them to share their stories with the whole class; students are also encouraged to include their stories in their first draft. This activity usually works effectively to get students started and at the same time let them see the significance of details.

## **Conclusion**

Due to the complex nature of “college-level writing,” there is hardly a neat, simple definition of it that teachers and researchers may apply across the board nor is there any fixed, clear-cut formula of “good” college-level writing that we can spell out for our students. ESL writers, coming from diverse cultural, educational, and linguistic backgrounds, further complicate the task to define “college-level writing”: These writers bring with them their different writing strategies, or “foreign accents,” to the writing classroom in the United States. In a world that is becoming more and more global at all levels, it is time for us to include these accents, which are a natural part of their identities as writers, in the discussion of college-level writing.

As illustrated by the sample essays, ESL writers’ widely varied notions about academic writing may conflict with expectations in new academic settings in the United States. When this happens, should writing teachers respect ESL writers’ values and preconceptions about writing and keep them intact, or should we interfere and introduce new notions of literacy to them? The answer might lie in students’ own needs and life goals, but, as a teacher, in some way I think we should do both. As writing teachers, we should not view the *different* rhetorical strategies used by ESL writers as *deficient* and impose the conventions of English writing on these writers. But on the other hand, our professional ethics require us to initiate ESL writers into the U.S. academic environment and facilitate their study here; thus, it is responsibility as writing teachers to familiarize our students with the expectations of the new academic settings and raise their awareness of rhetorical differences across cultures, disciplines, and genres. To be an effective ESL writing teacher, the first step is to get to know the diverse student population better and understand their literacy assumptions through various writing activities, class discussions,

peer interactions, and conferences. The writer's autobiography assignment is one of many ways to help us achieve this goal.

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