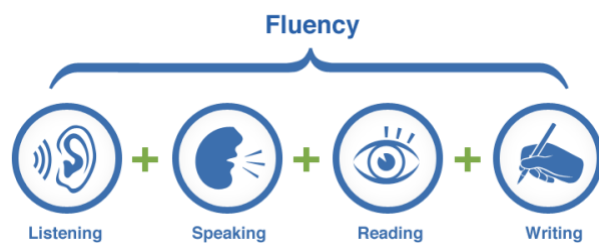# Working with Multilingual Writers

Mason's multilingual student population is very diverse, ranging from international or immigrant students for whom English is an additional *or* new language to students who are native to English alongside other languages. This means that our students' levels of proficiency with English are quite varied; in other words, as a reader of your students' writing, you will likely notice varying degrees of second language interference, making the document either more or less readable.

As faculty in the disciplines, it's important to recognize that our students' productive skills (writing and speaking) are highly affected by their receptive skills (reading and listening). For international multilingual writers for whom English is an additional/new language, for example, processing readings or lectures in a new language can be very challenging. As a result, this group of students may struggle to understand course content and that limited understanding often hinders their writing or presentation abilities. On the other hand, students who are from immigrant families who speak their native language at home but English in the other contexts of their lives, for example, may have strong oral skills (listening and speaking), but may struggle with literacy skills (reading and writing) in English.

For faculty in the disciplines, your expertise lies in the content of your discipline and not in language usage, mechanics, or "correctness." Therefore, addressing and assessing students' language proficiency in English lies outside of your purview. However, there are a few steps you can take to support the varying needs of multilingual students in your writing-intensive or writing-enhanced classroom:

General instructional considerations:

- Provide multiple means to assess students' comprehension of texts/lectures (e.g. group discussions, online discussion, conferencing, student presentations, etc.)
- Consider increasing the frequency and format of informal assessments (e.g. exit tickets, online discussion, student-led teaching demonstrations, etc.).
- Provide students with time to think/write/talk before responding to teacher/class.
- Include pre-reading and pre-writing activities (e.g. previewing vocabulary and cultural references, accessing prior knowledge, making text-to-self connections, etc.)
- Value silence. Since listening and comprehension in an additional/new language can be challenging, it may take students a little extra time to process the question or idea up for discussion.
- Include accessible humor. Be aware of colloquialisms and cultural references.

Anna S. Habib, Associate Director, Composition
Karyn Kessler, Academic Director, INTO Mason

Designing writing assignments:

- For many international students in particular, writing may not have been a primary means of learning or assessment in their prior educational contexts. Therefore, being explicit about the goals/purpose of writing assignments can be very helpful. Here is some language you might use to describe the purposes for writing in your course:
  - Writing is a product in which students display their comprehension/knowledge of the course content
  - Writing is a tool students use to reflect personally on a topic
  - Writing is the means by which I evaluate students' ability to synthesize, analyze, summarize, and compare
  - Writing is a tool student use to explore a topic
  - Writing is an outlet for creative expression
  - Writing is a process involving many phases and drafts
  - Writing is meant to be reviewed/shared in class
  - Writing is a regular in-class activity
- Assume reading and writing will take longer than it does for native English speakers.
- Couple each assignment with model student papers (positive and negative examples)
- Be ready to clarify common academic assignment terms (e.g. analysis, summary, main idea, thesis statement, argument, development, grammar, originality, critical thinking, reflection, etc.)

Feedback on student writing:

- Articulate the purpose of your feedback (will you focus on content? composition goals? language?)
- Provide clear, direct individualized feedback (i.e. hedging suggestions may lead to confusion regarding your expectations).
- Try to avoid vague feedback (e.g. "This needs to be redone." "Work on your grammar." "You need to spend more time on this.")

  - Blend positive/constructive feedback. Consider the effect of your feedback on student language development overall.
  - Don't underestimate the value of individual conferencing.
  - If you do decide to provide language feedback, pace yourself. Do not feel that you need to provide language feedback on every assignment
  - If you do decide to provide language feedback, consider highlighting the usage errors you notice and ask students to correct them in the next draft. Noticing errors
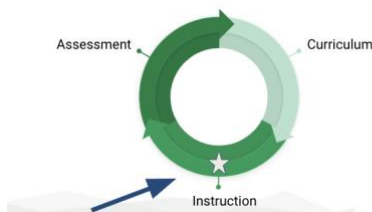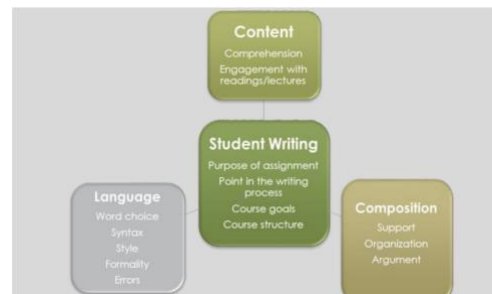
without requiring revision is counter-productive for students' language development. Likewise, marking students down for incorrect usage without having provided any instruction in language or grammar goes against what we know about good pedagogy (i.e. the curriculum-instruction-assessment cycle).

Further Readings:

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