“Just correct it.” Such is the familiar demand of the student who sees the writing teacher not as a coach and instructor but as a proofreader. This is only one of the misunderstandings Beverly Alsleben encounters as she works with Mikal, an adult English language learner. In this article the author makes some suggestions for ways to bridge the common cultural differences that arise when teaching new arrivals to our country.

Thirty Minutes with Mikal

BEVERLY ALSLEBEN

A tall, dark-haired man who looked to be in his forties walked toward my table. “Where’s Frank? I always see Frank!” he insisted.

“Frank’s not available for the night,” I said with a smile. After introducing myself as the new writing center consultant for nonnative speakers of English, I inquired about his interests, concerns, and language background. Mikal told me he was a graduate student in business who knew English well even though it was not his first language.

“Frank is good,” he added. “He knows how to help me.”

My mind raced as I explored how to respond. Time was against me. I had thirty minutes before my next appointment to pick a plan of action and prioritize a few writing issues from the papers he held in his hand. “I’d be glad to help you with your paper,” I said as Mikal reluctantly sat down. Thus began my experience as a “triage” writing consultant—focusing, guiding, redirecting, and encouraging nonnative speakers in their writing assignments at the writing center of a metropolitan university.

I took on the role of writing consultant knowing it would add depth to my work as a teacher of 120 immigrant and refugee junior high students. For one semester I shared my training and teaching experience with the university academic skills coordinator and student writing consultants. More importantly, the writing center staff and students taught me writing and conferencing skills that continue to impact my teaching. Mikal, in particular, was a student who prompted me to examine my approach with students and teaching techniques in several crucial areas of second language teaching. Here are some of the questions my work with Mikal forced me to ask.

What is this student thinking? Does he understand what is expected of him? Mikal’s opening words, “He knows how to help me,” signaled his lack of trust in my ability. What did he mean by that?

What had Frank done to capture Mikal’s trust?

I decided to ask Mikal some questions. Maybe I could make him feel safe. “Tell me about yourself. What are your interests? Where are you from? What languages do you speak?” I know that these questions are also tools that check for a student’s understanding and oral fluency and shed light on his writing proficiency.

Mikal seemed detached and in a hurry. His answers to my questions were brief and even evasive. Would Mikal’s writing show in-depth thinking? Did he understand his role as the writer and my role as the consultant? I questioned whether he understood the enormity of the task of writing academic papers in English at the graduate level. His answers to my introductory questions were brief—his country . . . his language . . . his profession (businessman). I presumed that Mikal came to the United States as an educated professional who yearned to practice his profession here and viewed my questions
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as nothing more than a deterrence to the work at hand. Reading his writing confirmed my suspicions. Mikal was in a hurry and had put minimal effort into clarifying his thoughts.

Mikal was telling me enough that I recognized he shared a mindset with many other English language learners (E.L.L.). Many of these students see second language learning as a peripheral issue. Mikal seemed reluctant to consider himself an English language learner since he spoke English, communicated quite well orally, had a college education in his country, and was most likely not acknowledged as a second-language learner in the classroom. What I hoped Mikal would discover was that he needed proficiency in academic English to think critically and communicate effectively in the American business community. I tried to tread lightly.

"Tell me what your assignment is," I requested, wanting to check for understanding.

"It's right there," he said, pointing to his assignment sheet. "I don't have to tell you."

I was taken aback by his abruptness. The assignment read:

Write approximately a twenty page paper choosing a problem in business that you have had experience with or researched. Analyze this problem in light of the readings and provide a solution for the problem citing specific examples from the text and various sources.

Did Mikal understand the assignment, and could he articulate it? Was he aware of how to organize a paper that would reflect American thinking styles? In asking Mikal to explain his writing, I hoped to plant seeds by encouraging him to begin thinking beyond words and grammar to content and organization.

How can I ease him into American cultural thinking and organizational styles? After skimming Mikal's paper to get an overall perspective, it became clear Mikal's paper lacked a focus and the organization American professors expect. He addressed these topics: his background and training, his work experience and responsibilities, business ethics in his country, women in the workplace and at home in both his country and the United States, and business theory.

"What is the main point you want to make?" I asked Mikal, hoping he would prioritize his work as a writer. However, Mikal was confused by my question and did not seem to realize there was a problem.

"Just read and correct like Frank does," he said.

Mikal needed direction. He had limited experience reading academic English. American students, on the other hand, adopt writing models from academic reading. In a 2002 workshop sponsored by the Minnesota Writing Project in Minneapolis, Sheryl Holt, English writing coordinator for nonnative speakers at the University of Minnesota, discussed her work with college nonnative speakers. From her experience, she advocates the instructor "model the 'correct' theme, focus, or structure....Without concrete examples and models, the student is likely to go away confused" (2002).

I told Mikal that I thought the focus in his paper appeared to be the role of women in the workplace. Mikal's silence gave me license to continue discussing the organization and focus of his paper. As I spoke, I numbered Mikal's paragraphs and made notes along with a brief outline. This would serve as a model for Mikal to reorganize his work:

I. Your background and how it ties in with women in the workplace
II. The problem—women in the workplace
III. Personal experiences—working with women in your country
IV. Business ethics—in regard to working women in your country

Holt stated, “What an American considers logical in an academic paper may not be logical in another culture” (2002). Mikal's paper also lacked organization because he did not understand basic paragraph structure. Each of his paragraphs contained several ideas that were underdeveloped and disjointed.

My country has hard life only money can get education. I worked long time selling cloths at markets to get money support my family. The money also for the future after the company I worked had a good experience. Men in my country have more responsibility in the job with women and conflict because at home they have different attitudes. In America it is the same.

Also according to Holt, “There will often be jumps between ideas with fewer written explanations of how the ideas are connected” (2002). I briefly explained that each paragraph should contain one main idea, supporting evidence, and examples and details from experience and other sources. I asked Mikal to explain the relationship between his background and his interest in examining the role of women in business. Often a clear oral statement comes easily and helps clarify writing for students. He replied, "It's done.
It's here. Can't you see it? Let's go on. Read faster!” Mikal was unaware of his task because he was navigating new territory. I explained to Mikal that correcting the grammar was less important than organizing and clarifying his ideas, but I also realized Mikal wanted and needed to address grammatical issues.

How can I meet the student's expectations while maintaining good teaching practices? American teaching methods were “foreign” to Mikal. Unaccustomed to student-centered instruction, he misunderstood my intentions. Mikal did not recognize my questions as the typical teacher talk that American writing teachers use to prompt student revision. But I had to realize that his task (approaching the assignment and applying skills) was far more difficult than that of a native writer.

With a short time remaining, I addressed what Mikal had come for. As I read quickly, noting key grammatical errors, he replied, “Good! Now you're getting it!” I tried not to abandon good teaching practices and focused on one type of error that affected the reader's understanding. I encouraged him to analyze his own mistakes and think about self-correction after I had given him an example sentence. When Mikal’s paper read, “The employer’s rule was not acceptable in the culture that women cannot be supervisors,” I pointed out the misplaced adjective phrase and asked him how he could state it more clearly. He replied, “The employer's rule that women cannot be supervisors was not acceptable in the culture.”

This was a small breakthrough. Briefly, Mikal had taken responsibility for his own learning. He was able to find other sentences that posed the same difficulty. He was now aware that he often added adjective phrases that described a missing noun. He knew that he must go back to check and correct these sentences. He realized that if he forced himself to do that, he could write the sentence correctly. According to Alan Purves, “The primary task in the classroom is teaching a method of internal discovery” (1988, 280). Teaching students how to look at their writing critically is the first step that will allow them to question their own work or begin the process of revision.

But overall, Mikal was very reluctant to internalize, reflect, and take ownership of the grammar and mechanics problems in his paper, just as he was with the organization. He expected me to change and correct it. As we concluded the consultation, I said to Mikal, “This is what your teacher expects of you… Your ideas and examples are good. Explain them, work on this grammar problem, and develop your thesis.” I posed a couple of crucial questions and made notes in the margins of Mikal’s paper. The rest was up to him.

Mikal, who went on to graduate, came to see me about the same paper on two other occasions when Frank was absent. I noticed that Mikal was gradually moving out of his “just fix it” mentality and was taking more responsibility for his own work. His progress caused me to apply what I had learned from these sessions to my work with junior high school students. Here’s a kind of checklist I’ve developed to guide my work with second-language writers:

**Listen critically.** Piecing together information about the student’s background, attitude, language abilities, and goals helps a teacher relate to students and develop teaching strategies. This may mean backing up, taking a new approach, or letting go of your agenda as a teacher.

With Mikal, I consciously made the decision to take an approach he did not expect. It meant backing up to discuss organization that improved Mikal’s writing and introduced him to a pattern of self-correction.

Give students the “big” picture. What is it that they need to succeed? Be honest and state explanations and directions clearly and concisely. Tell students what you expect and help them find ways to get your feedback. Teach them to question, think, and speak in class. I suggested Mikal raise questions and discuss assignments with his professor. Students must learn to advocate for themselves when instructors do not address second-language issues or recognize the student as a nonnative speaker.

**Separate the writer from the language learner.** Compliment the student on the content when it reflects depth and breadth of thought even though it is imperfectly expressed in English. Address the impact of the writing by noting overall problems or accomplishments in organization, focus, or clarity. Then focus on one or two grammatical issues that affect understanding. Keep the writer's concerns in mind and share with the writer what you perceive to be his strengths. I complimented Mikal on the work he had done because it was obvious he had a different yet valuable perspective to share and had raised important issues.

**Challenge the student.** Students are often unaware of areas of writing needing improvement. Ignoring them will hinder the student’s progress. Raising questions will get them to begin thinking and solving English language problems. Work on understanding the American organizational style may be more important than sentence clarity, vocabulary, or grammar.
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Remember, your job is not to correct. Correcting Mikal’s grammatical mistakes would have prevented him from learning how to correct his own errors.

Respect cultural differences by being sensitive and nonjudgmental. It was not my job to question the religious, political, gender, or culturally based stances that surfaced in the student’s writing. Mikal’s views on the role of women were offensive to me, but it was not my place to suggest he was wrong. There is much to be learned from different cultural viewpoints, and my culture’s values are only different from, not superior to, Mikal’s.

Observations

From my sessions with Mikal, I also drew some general conclusions about English language learners at the university level and the support they receive. It is perhaps at the graduate level that students face the greatest challenges because English proficiency is assumed and critical thinking and writing skills must exhibit a higher level of understanding. It is the responsibility of everyone within the system to address the needs of English language learners. Do colleges and universities have a plan that addresses responsibility for student success? Are professors as well as the support staff involved? Are professors aware of second-language issues and how to address them? Do colleges offer an ELL class geared toward graduate academic writing and thinking for those whose screening suggests they would benefit from it?

Mikal’s professor should have had some signs that Mikal had difficulty with the language. A required outline or a rough draft would have provided me with a focus in working with Mikal as well as given Mikal a clear idea of how to reorganize before he had gone too far. It also could have provided the first step of communication between the professor and the writing center.

Within the writing center support system, are the guidelines clear, and are they communicated frequently to students? Work done by the consultants can be inconsistent if there is a breakdown in communication. Mikal did not understand that the guidelines stated it was not my job to correct his writing. There is also the matter of how different consultants focus on writing issues. Students who do not see one consultant consistently sometimes don’t know what to expect from one session to the next. Mikal had seen several different consultants before me, and there were no notations in his file indicating any problems with his thesis and the organization and development of his ideas. Should I then bypass the issue, knowing that he thought he was well past this phase?

What a task Mikal faced, considering many of his fellow students had been learning English all their lives! What a task a writing consultant faces! I tried to accomplish too much in one session—touching both on what I thought was important and what Mikal was asking of me. Had Mikal come to see me earlier, the task would have been easier. Professors can support the work of the writing center by indicating to students at what point in the process they should get assistance. A staff that works together, scaffolding support for language learners, will enable these learners to achieve greater success and minimize frustration for all involved.

Several months after my last consultation with Mikal, I was surprised to see him across the gym at my junior high school’s open house with one of our school’s students. Seeing Mikal as a parent, actively showing interest in the school, gave my experience with him new meaning. He was not only a graduate student and an immigrant. He was a husband and a father. He was what I had suspected—a successful businessman who had given up everything in his war-torn country to begin a new life in America. Watching Mikal, I noticed his self-assurance and confidence in his ability to handle this new situation. Yet I know the truth of David Lodge’s observation: “Language is a net that holds thought trapped within a particular culture” (Lester 1995, 3). It is not likely that Mikal will—or would want to—escape the net of his first language and culture. This language will probably always dictate many of his responses. However I’m convinced that encounters such as the thirty minutes we spent together at the writing center helped put Mikal on the road to English language proficiency, new insights, and a new sense of himself.

References


Beverly Alslabern teaches seventh and eighth grade English language learners at Highland Park Junior High in St. Paul, Minnesota. She is a Minnesota Writing Project teacher-consultant and a member of the leadership team of the National Writing Project ELL Network Leadership Team.