English as a second language (ESL) writing teachers face distinct challenges as they try to help students write in the language that is appropriate and natural to the native-English-speaking audience. It is disheartening when the writings of even advanced-level second language students often contain many awkward sentences and non-English-like patterns. ESL writers face various linguistic challenges as they write, and they should be allowed to navigate through the writings of others to attend to the linguistic features they may need in order to accurately express their thoughts. ESL writing teachers can help students by providing language support, through models and prewriting activities, that will encourage students to recognize certain linguistic forms and stock phrases used by native-English-speaking writers. The support of a writing center is also essential because a writing center not only introduces students to the academic community, but also serves as a forum where students can negotiate meanings and discover correct language forms so that they can then convey them.

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According to the Chronicle of Higher Education, between 2008 and 2009 some 671,000 foreign students attended U.S. institutions, Asians being the most numerous at 62%. These students brought not only $17.6 billion dollars to the U.S. economy, but also significant challenges to college instructors because they enter these institutions with various linguistic abilities and backgrounds.

Although not everyone agrees that English as a second language (ESL) students should try to closely approximate the language and rhetorical styles of Anglo-American writing, most
ESL writing teachers expect students to write compositions that are fluent and natural to the native ear. It is not unusual for even advanced-level ESL students, who can read and understand quite complex materials and score high marks on a test, to have awkward sentences and non-English-like patterns in their writing. Unlike reading and listening, writing is a productive activity that requires comprehensive linguistic, rhetorical, and cultural knowledge as well as metalinguistic ability. Unfortunately, there is no single etiology for second language learners’ writing problems, because their needs are as varied as their linguistic, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Like ESL students, many ESL writing teachers face distinct challenges; they are hard-pressed to prepare cash-strapped, eager-to-matriculate ESL students for various academic writing tasks in the span of two or three semesters. Anyone who has worked with ESL writers knows how arduous it is to write in a second language. No matter how positive and encouraging we as teachers may be, it is an undeniable fact that many ESL students find writing academic essays painfully difficult. We are lucky if we find adult ESL students with exceptional zeal and enthusiasm for writing, with the potential of becoming the next Joseph Conrad or Ha Jin.¹ However, most of the ESL students we encounter in college settings stumble and fumble as they try to shape their discourse in the foreign language. Adding to the burden are the expectations of non-ESL college teachers, who often place the blame for unsuccessful performance of ESL students on the ESL program. Statements such as “How did this student get out of ESL?” or “Your ESL student is not ready to be in my class” are commonly raised concerns. ESL teachers and program administrators are often at the receiving end of the blame for “discharging” these “handicapped” writers prematurely. What many non-ESL instructors don’t understand is that it is a tremendously challenging, often unrealistic goal to transform these students into competent writers in a year or two. What we as teachers can do during this short time is to teach them strategies,

¹Both Joseph Conrad (1857–1924, Polish-born English author) and Ha Jin (born and educated in China, started writing about China in English when he came to the United States in 1984) are examples of successful second language writers.
and it may take as long as a decade or two for second language learners to become skillful writers.

A plethora of articles address various issues related to second language writers; the purpose of this article is to contribute to the field by adding to the practitioners’ lore effective strategies for relieving the overwhelming challenges that second language writers and teachers face. Because I believe it is important to understand who we are teaching before discussing how and what we teach, I first reflect on what it is like to write in English as a second language before presenting these tools.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING?

As a second language student–turned–ESL teacher, I have had the special privilege of being able to relate to ESL students’ writing processes, in which dissonant ideas and unclear sentences slowly and arduously develop into a connected and fluid whole. Many adult ESL students come to my class not even knowing how to pronounce the word essay—some Hispanic students still pronounce it esai or issy. Do they know, then, what elements an academic essay has, at least? Some ESL students encounter the word and concept of an essay in my ESL writing classroom for the first time. Basic elements of academic writing, such as paragraph, topic sentence, thesis statement, synthesis, and supporting details are new concepts for many students. A Korean student in my class said:

I have never learned composition in Korea. Of course, I have ever written paper in Korea when I was university student. But I didn’t need to learn composition because my major was physics and math.

A Cuban student reflected:

In the education system in Cuba do not exist a specific class for writing. Writing is taught in the grammar class, the name “Grammar and Composition,” but the time spend in writing is a minimal part of the class.

A student from the same language background reported:
I learned about the composition with capital letter and period at the end. Other skill was looking good connection between ideas. This is the first time that I’m receiving specific and deep instruction, and how I can write more clearly and with more effectiveness.

Writing, a somewhat novel subject to many, presents a host of other challenges. First, students’ limited vocabulary and knowledge of its correct usage create further problems. As Gass and Selinker (2009) put it, “the lexicon may be the most important language component for learners” (p. 449), and native English speakers find lexical errors more disruptive than syntactic errors in written communication. It is estimated that an average native-English-speaking high school graduate knows approximately 60,000 English words (Fromkin, Rodman, & Hyams, 2003, p. 69). It is clearly impossible for ESL students to acquire even a third of that—20,000 words—within a few semesters of intensive English studies. Considering that most of their writing assignments accompany reading, it is obvious that ESL students in college classrooms face an enormous challenge. Learning new words involves learning not only their meanings but also how to use them, and in order to do that students need to understand different shades of meaning, collocations, synonyms, superordinates, and various morphological transformations, as well as the grammatical categories of those words. Examples of gaffes from ESL students in my classes include shy women instead of submissive women; out beauty instead of outward beauty, looks; hunger children instead of hungry children; and high building instead of tall building.

In addition, many of the words that students are expected to know in order to write academic essays are low-frequency words, which they normally don’t encounter. For example, words that are used in a problem-solution type of essay, such as drawback, hamper, hinder, impact, outcome, implement, rationale, and viable, just to name a few, are highly abstract words. As McCarthy (1991) points out, these low-frequency words, so-called academic vocabulary, can pose a serious lexical challenge, particularly for students who do not come from a Romance or Germanic language background.

Besides, for many ESL students, learning English means far more than transitioning, for example, from a language of
postposition to a language of preposition, as is the case with
Korean or Japanese learners of English. Mastering the syntax and
morphology of the second language is far more complicated than
mastering the rules in the grammar textbooks. Consider, for
example, the following sentences written by ESL students in my
classes:

Thank you for pray. I’m very hard, also my condition is 0%.

The most things I regret is I didn’t learn just mental skills because I
spent a lot of time and even much money to learn knowledge.

However, unfortunately, Korean student’s satisfaction of their life rate
is lower than other country’s students.

It is clear that the problems in these sentences can’t be properly
addressed by looking only at issues with syntax, morphology,
semantics, or pragmatics. Even advanced-level ESL students tell me
that when they write, they compose in their first language in their
head and then translate it into English. Although both speaking and
writing are productive activities, writing takes more processing
time, and their native language still controls the writing activity to a
large extent, English remaining the second language. That’s why
even when the sentences are grammatically correct, they are often
semantically anomalous. The sentences often do not express what
students intend to say because they depend on their meager lexical
resources and inadequately controlled phrase structures to convey
meanings formed in their first language. In addition, many ESL
students are speakers of languages that don’t have articles, modals,
and tenses. Moreover, the phonological system of their first
language usually matches the spelling system, unlike in English.

Compounding the problem is a cultural issue. Teachers often
find that ESL students’ writing shows problems that arise from
different cultural thought patterns. A Brazilian student from my
class observed:

Portuguese speaking writer makes detours. A Portuguese para-
graph may begin and end on the same topic, but the writer often
takes the reader on interesting side trips that are not directly
related to the main point. This style breaks one of the important
rules of English writing, the rule of the paragraph unity.
Cross-cultural research by Jenkins and Hinds (1987) in business writing indeed shows interesting differences in rhetorical patterns. U.S. writers directly state their purposes, take the reader’s point of view into consideration, and prefer a simple and succinct style. In contrast, French business letters are writer-oriented. Paragraphs convey information very concisely and clearly, but in a way that is abrupt and impersonal because writers make hardly any attempt to phrase their information in terms of the reader’s needs. Japanese writing style is oriented to the relationship, or the space between the writer and the reader, and frequently includes indirect statements that “hint at the problem” (p. 336).

**PROVIDING A SOUNDING BOARD**

How, then, can teachers help the ESL students who face these various challenges? Are there any effective strategies? Although there’s no cure-all, there are small steps that can be taken, and I believe that the job of a writing teacher is to find, test, and share these small steps in order to add to the existing pedagogical tools.

**Phrase-Searching Activity**

First and foremost, ESL students need the lexical equipment to convey their thoughts. To do that, it is important for them to navigate through the writings of others and attend to the linguistic features and clusters of words used by native-English-speaking writers. Native speakers use prefabricated phrases, and ESL students need to increase the storage of such language chunks in order to express their thoughts freely. Without these, they will depend on circumlocution and nonnative-like patterns. The phrase-searching activity presented in this section enables students to gather native lexical samples, which are important tools for building their discourse.

The psycholinguistic research that has developed during the past three decades has shown that conscious awareness of and explicit attention to the form are essential for learning to take place (Bialystok, 1978; Ellis, 1994; Gass, 1997; Schmidt, 1990). To put it differently, students’ ability to produce correct and appropriate output requires conscious effort on their part, not just exposure to input. The theory assumes that unless students make a conscious
effort to notice the phrases and the linguistic features, they will not be able to internalize them.

The prewriting activity in Figure 1 capitalizes on this psycholinguistic construct of awareness and noticing. I used the activity with high-intermediate-level ESL students after they had come up with an initial outline for their compare/contrast essay. As illustrated in the instructions, students were asked to find and record useful lexical samples used in a model on a similar topic. The following is a sample worksheet that a Mexican student completed along with the sentences she subsequently wrote in the essay incorporating lexical items gleaned from the activity (the student’s sentences are italicized):

The student clearly benefited from the activity: “I had the ideas but not the expressions. But this activity helps me to find those expressions. You should have told us before!” This student

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Compare/Contrast Essay</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prewriting Activity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructions: This activity is to help you find necessary vocabulary and expressions for your essay. Find two articles on the Internet that address similar issues to your topic. As you read, find words or phrases that you think would be helpful as you write your essay, and include them below. After completing this activity, start writing your essay, and try to incorporate the words and phrases, but not the author’s sentences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Topic: Different of Raising Children in America vs. Mexico</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Titles of Sources: The Four Common Types of Parenting Styles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture and Parenting Issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Words or Phrases</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Types of parenting styles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Authoritarian parenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Neglectful parenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Differences between each of these styles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Parental rules and directions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Latino families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Childrearing practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• There are important social and cultural differences between these three</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Prewriting activity sheet
incorporated the lexical items she gleaned in the following sentences (lexical items are italicized): “I know all around the world there are important social and cultural differences in each country.” “I want to discuss the different childrearing practices in the United States and Mexico.” “In most Latino families discipline is often strict.” “In conclusion, there are different types of parenting styles in different countries.”

Another student responded, “This is helpful because it gives me the expressions I need to write my essay.” I recognize that this activity can easily teeter toward plagiarism because it is easy and tempting to copy and insert entire sentences. Students need close guidance as to what is and is not acceptable in terms of borrowing, and this activity provides a venue to demonstrate that there is a clear distinction between plagiarizing and gleaning lexical items from published texts—important knowledge often neglected by novice ESL writers.

**Using Templates as a Sounding Board**

The second pedagogical tool I want to present is also based on the idea that skilled writers typically use certain stock expressions as they generate what they want to say. Whereas the previous activity focused on lexical items, the next activity involves stock phrases commonly used by successful writers in academic writing. Examining the rhetorical tradition reveals that classical rhetoricians also recognized the importance of internalizing lexical items and styles through models in developing writing skills. In order to improve students’ writing skills, Roman teachers engaged students in exercises in which students were asked to take a passage of prose that they admired, read it over and over until they absorbed the sense and structure of it, then write the thought of the passage in their own words without looking at the original text (Corbett, 1971).

Most ESL writing textbooks provide ample materials guiding them through prewriting, writing, and revising processes. What is missing in many of the modern textbooks is models or what Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst (2009) call templates to help novice writers to make skilled moves. In addition to introducing them to academic verbs, such as argue, claim, point out, hypothesize, observe,
and examine, and transitional expressions, why not go one step further and provide effective phrases used by other successful writers?

Using the following templates from *They Say I Say*, originally intended for first language college students, helped my tongue-tied ESL students to express their thoughts clearly. The templates liberated these novice writers from linguistic burdens and helped them to effectively convey their thoughts in the alien language (the templates are italicized.). One student used the modified template for agreeing and disagreeing simultaneously to express her view:

*My feelings on the issue are mixed. I do support Kohn’s position that the task’s difficulty level would be only one factor among many, and not the most important. I also agree with him that exceedingly high standards are irrelevant. However, I find Kohn’s claim that America is facing an “emergency” as a result of raising standards not very persuasive.*

Templates such as the following (adapted from Graff et al., 2009) can serve a double purpose: first, they can serve as a tool that students can readily apply as they perform a social act of entering a conversation. Second, these templates can help students organize and frame their thoughts by serving as a guide.

**Templates for introducing standard views:**

- Conventional wisdom has it that . . .
- The standard way of thinking about I . . . Is that . . .

**Templates for introducing quotations:**

- As the prominent scholar X puts it, . . .
- X agrees when she writes . . .
- The essence of X’s argument is that . . .
- In making this comment, X claims that . . .

**Templates for agreeing and disagreeing simultaneously:**

- Though I acknowledge that . . ., I still believe that . . .
- Although I agree with X up to a point, I cannot accept his/her overall argument that . . .
- My feelings on the issue are mixed. I do support X’s position that . . ., but I find . . . hard to endorse . . .
Templates for establishing why your claims matter:

- Although X may seem important to only a small group of people, it should in fact concern anyone who . . .
- Although X may seem trivial, it is in fact, crucial in terms of today’s concern over . . .

As Graff et al. (2009) put it, “templates can bring out aspects of students’ thoughts that, as they themselves sometimes remark, they didn’t even realize were there” (p. xvi). Having these templates handy will help students focus their attention on the forms as well as the content, and at the same time help them to discover their ideas by providing a guiding framework to voice their thoughts.

A SAVING ORGANIZATION FOR TEACHERS

Once the students have come up with a draft as a result of going through these activities, it is critical that ESL students have another pair of eyes to help them see how their sentences are understood or not understood by the reader. Unlike first language students who can detect problems often by reading their sentences out loud, many ESL writers are not competent in this tactic. This is because they are being asked to make judgments about a language of which their knowledge is incomplete, and they have not acquired the English ear. Recently, I asked high- and intermediate-level ESL students to devote an entire class period to revising and editing the drafts they had already produced and then submit their revisions at the end of the class. I was interested in finding out what they attended to most in their revisions. The results showed that their revised essays did show improvement, but changes mainly included word substitutions and addition of new phrases and sentences. A Mexican student’s revised paragraph showed improvement on a limited scale (italics are added to highlight changes):

Draft:
Education is very important on any phase in our life. I grow up in Mexico, and I got almost all my education in there. I moved to USA when I was 23 years old, and I have seen differences about the hours the kids were in the school, very different than my country. In my opinion, I think is too much time the schools
expend with the kids. In the past, I was asked this what the kids
do all day in the school. Until I was working such a tutor at one
of the school close to me, and I discovered that the kids waste
time during the day. I think it is enough 4 hours a day.

Revisio

Education is very important on any phase in our life. I grew
up in Mexico, and I got almost all my education in there. I moved
to USA when I was 23 years old, and I have seen differences
about the hours the kids were at the elementary school, very dif-
ferent than my country. In my opinion, I think is too much time
the elementary schools expend with the kids. In the past, I was
asked this question what the kids do all day at school? Until I
was working such a tutor at one of the elementary school close to
me, and I discovered that the kids waste time during the day. In
my opinion, it is enough 4 hours a day.

The student’s revision attempts were mainly focused on
adding additional words such as elementary and question.

Another student, who reported having studied English
grammar for 12 years in her country, also made mostly word-level
changes, such as plural to singular, leaving other bigger concerns
unattended:

Draft:
On average, from eighteen years old to thirty years old, these
age groups are showed that they are interested in their outward
beauties. They always are concerned about plastic surgeries even
they have dangers of side effects. The reason that we educate
about inner beauty is so many peoples in Korea, they think that
women must beautiful, skinny and men must handsome, well-
muscled like a model if they don’t, they are not human. And fat
or ugly people are neglected. So every woman even men who
don’t want to be neglected are trying to lose weight, take a plas-
tic surgeries for their outward beauty even they got a plastic
surgery many times before. They everyday think that only beau-
tiful person is the best. People need to educate about impor-
tance of inner beauties for solve this serious situation.

Revision:
On average, from eighteen years old to thirty years old, these
age groups are showed that they are interested in their outward
beauty. They always are concerned about plastic surgeries even
they have dangers of side effects. The reason that we educate
about inner beauty is so many people in Korea, they think that
women must beautiful, skinny and men must handsome, well-
muscled like a model if they don’t, they are not human to them. And fat or ugly people are neglected. So every woman even men who don’t want to be neglected are trying to lose weight, taking a plastic surgeries for their outward beauty even they got a plastic surgery many times before. They everyday think that only beautiful person is the best. People need to educate about importance of inner beauty for solving this serious situation.

As these examples illustrate, no one needs the help of an experienced writing tutor more than an ESL student. The benefits of utilizing a writing center are twofold. First, it provides students with an opportunity to engage in collaborative dialogue and instructional conversation (Swain, 2000), serving as a forum where they can negotiate their meanings and discover the appropriate language forms to convey them. Through the one-on-one tutoring sessions, which are essential for learning but often challenging for many overworked ESL teachers, students can get a sense of how their syntactic and morphological choices deviate from the native speaker patterns. A number of sociocultural second language acquisition theorists (e.g., Artigal, 1992; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Swain, 2000; Vygotsky, 1987) have pointed out that conversational interaction is vital to the development of second language acquisition. What better place could there be for such development to occur than in a writing center? In addition, it makes the teacher’s job less intimidating by significantly reducing the time spent on commenting and correcting the papers.

I find that the writing center visit is most fruitful when the instructor, the student, and the tutor all have the same goals to achieve. It is not uncommon to hear frustrated ESL students report rather unsatisfactory experiences, such as that their tutors were either too “generous” towards their writing or only focused on limited aspects.

As a way of addressing this issue, I suggest providing a checklist to accompany the visit to the writing center, specifying areas to focus on. Using checklists, if not always completely satisfactory (due to tutor variations), has mostly yielded fruitful outcomes as a result of helping the student and the tutor to reach a clear mutual understanding of what is expected of the assignment (see the Appendix for a sample checklist).
students to bring back the completed checklists to class with their revised draft to ensure that the session with the tutor was spent on the required aspects. Once the student’s draft has gone through the initial revision process with the tutor, the teacher is in a better position to comment on more global issues.

I have only briefly touched on limited aspects of the complexity involved in the process of second language writing, and suggested that we provide ESL students and teachers with saving organizations to relieve their burdens. Not every pedagogical technique may work for every student, as different students will find certain activities more helpful than others. Regardless of students’ proficiency levels, linguistic backgrounds, and learning styles, one thing remains certain—they all need someone else’s voices to find their own English voices, and it is our mission, as classroom practitioners, to discover and share helpful writing strategies to cater to a wide variety of second language writers, thereby bridging the gap between theory and practice commonly observed in our field.

THE AUTHOR
E. Julia Kim is an associate professor of English at Andrews University, in Berrien Springs, Michigan. She has worked with ESL students for more than 10 years, and currently she mentors graduate students in the MA TESL program. Her main areas of interest are second language writing, vocabulary acquisition, and World Englishes.

REFERENCES


**APPENDIX**

**Checklist**
Submit this checklist, the draft you took to a tutor, the final draft, and the scoring rubric.
Problem-Solution Essay Checklist

Introduction:

1. Is there an interesting hook? ___________
2. Is there a description of the problem? ___________
3. Does the thesis statement mention the solutions? ___________

Body: Solution(s)

1. Is each solution explained with sufficient details? ___________
2. Does each body paragraph have a clear topic sentence? ___________
3. Are the solutions achievable and reasonable? ___________

Conclusion:

1. Does the conclusion summarize the main points of the essay? ___________
2. Does the conclusion contain a recommendation, a prediction, or a closing thought? ___________

Grammar/punctuation/avoiding overgeneralization:

1. Are the sentences grammatically correct? ___________
2. Does the essay have several good examples of hedging language used to avoid overgeneralization? ___________
3. Has the essay been carefully proofread? ___________

Please identify areas that need further improvement:

____________________________________________________________

Plagiarism Statement

I certify that no part of this essay was plagiarized. All the sentences are my own sentences, and any information or data borrowed from a source was put in my own words, and proper credit has been given to the source.

____________________________________________________________

Sign your name Date

____________________________________________________________

Tutor Name Tutor Signature