
Reviewed by Gyl Mattioli, Georgia State University

From the introduction of the first volume in Matsuda’s forthcoming series on second language (L2) writing, the reader learns that there is a gap in the field. L2 researchers to date have focused primarily on student writers within the classroom context, and have rarely stepped over their thresholds to look beyond the classroom microcosm and into the wider boundaries of the surrounding institution; hence this collection on institutional policies and their intersections with the dynamics of L2 writing pedagogy. The book’s title is borrowed from one of L2 writing’s most prominent scholars, Barbara Kroll. At the 2004 Symposium on Second Language Writing, a biennial meeting of L2 writing professionals and applied linguists, Kroll commented on the situational difficulties L2 writers on university and college campuses in the US face and imagined a “promised land” where these obstacles would cease to exist. Institutional policies and politics were the theme of that year’s meeting, and the ensuing papers evolved into the present volume. In the hopes of finding solutions to external (institutional/administrative/political) problems that impact internal (classroom/course/developmental/individual) learning contexts, the chapters of this work discuss systems and programs in place for students in general, and L2 students in particular. Despite the negative connotations of the term “politics,” the collection also presents possible solutions to the problems it discusses, and informs the reader of an area of composition pedagogy that often goes unnoticed.

The book begins with an extensive overview not only of the origins of the collection, but also a brief look at the budding field of L2 writing research. Much in the same way first-language compositionists often had to (and sometimes still have to) justify their existence and confirm their validity as scholars and members of the academy, the editors—two of whom, interestingly enough, are L2 writers themselves who have become leading compositionists and advocates for L2 student writer voice—seek to awaken a global consciousness to the world of teaching and researching writing in an additional language. The target audience is not just those in the know, they explain, but also those whose classrooms and institutions are increasingly populated by students who fall into the ever-broadening category of the L2 writer. The book has five sections that encompass the various areas and levels of academic writing—K-12, learning support, English for academic purposes (EAP), assessment, and professional concerns—and ends with a
final word from Kroll, whose phrase sets the tone for the whole work. From bilingual literacy to international teaching assistant training, writing centers to the dynamics of action research, the chapters examine the full gamut of L2 writing contexts.

Highlights of the sections include Fu and Matoush’s chapter on middle school-aged Chinese speakers in an innovative instructional project that allows student writers to scaffold their acquisition of English literacy with their native language writing skills. All fully literate in their native language (L1), students write in a mixed code style that allows them to slowly make the transition to English without devaluing Chinese expressive styles and abilities. Evidently an ongoing project for the two, Fu and Matoush presented this research at the 2006 Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) conference in Tampa, and the session was extremely well-attended due to obvious practical and ethical vectors of promoting biliteracy. At the university level, in the section on EAP, Gentil discusses the need for biliteracy development in Canadian institutions of higher learning and describes a student whose degree progress suffers by her having the option to use two languages, but not the institutional support to do so adequately and with proper academic writing instruction. Connected by the common thread of the existence (or lack) of institutional bilingual literacy programs, these two chapters show two sides of the issue.

A recurring theme is integration/assimilation of L2 student writers into mainstream L1 composition environments, be they formal classroom courses or tutored sessions in university writing centers. An interesting experiment is found in Dadak’s chapter on American University’s abolition of its English as a second language (ESL) program. Initially viewed as a problem, it seems now to have turned into an opportunity for alternative ways to serve L2 writers in one of Washington DC’s most famous international universities. ESL and composition professionals there have come up with ways to serve their L2 population that may not be ideal, but at least take students to the next leg of their academic journey. A plus from the situation is doubtless the increased awareness among L1 faculty of the particular needs and possibilities L2 students possess.

Educators have always wrestled with the dilemma of assessing student writing, and in L2 circles, this dilemma is intensified by ethical/political issues related to cultural and sociolinguistic concerns. To this end, two of the field’s most prominent assessment specialists have contributed chapters to the volume. Crusan’s chapter on directed self-placement—something L1 writers can do, but that is still in the experimental stages for L2 students—as a solution to placement testing discrepancies at her university, and Weigle’s optimistic findings about the washback (positive acquisitional transfer from
language testing) from an institutional exam L2 students are required to sit for both provide bright glimpses of successful assessment solutions. Once again, the potentially negative term politics is diffused by the professional commitment of the faculty and administrators described in these chapters.

In their discussions of institutional/political concerns beyond the classroom doors, the chapters’ authors pose a series of questions for which they often have no pat answers: How can international teaching assistants create a more acceptable/desirable ethos in class so as to compensate for the almost automatic dread they inspire in the hearts of their freshman students? How can institutions provide equal levels of support and instruction in two languages in order to truly foster biliteracy at university level? What can composition instructors do to better prepare their L1 and L2 student writers for writing in their individual disciplines in authentic, meaningful ways? How can writing centers effectively serve all student writers, and not just those whose English is native/near-native? Should institutions maintain separate (and hopefully equal) facilities for L2 learners, or should these students be mainstreamed? And, what kind of preparation do mainstream instructors need to be given to deal with the issues L2 writers bring with them to the classroom? On that note, who is an L2 writer, anyway? The questions are many and difficult to respond to, but this book is a very significant step towards answering them.

Just before the coda, as the penultimate chapter, the editors chose to insert a backwards look at the developmental stages of an ESL program in a California university. The chapter’s author has taught at the institution for over thirty years, and has been a part of the program’s growth and changes. Vandrick’s essay is a nice way to conclude the book as it helps the reader appreciate the dynamic nature of academia and the value of reflective teaching and administration as well. Overall, the collection is an informative, objective look at the multiple contexts in which L2 writing is taught and learned, and at how these contexts impact their instructional success.

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