

## Writing about Multilingual Writing and Adaptive Transfer in an FYC Course

**Lindsey Ives**

*Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University*

“Students’ seeming inability to make inferences or apply knowledge across different educational contexts was a tremendous source of frustration for our focus group subjects and helped explain many of the weaknesses in students’ writing witnessed by non-composition instructors” (Nelms and Dively 223).

“It will take some adjustment in our attitudes and assumptions to realize, and to plan our curricula on the basis of, the fact that speaking another language in addition to English is not a deficit or a disadvantage but rather a normal phenomenon, and one that should be actively cultivated” (Hall 37).

The above quotes represent two frequently discussed questions for college composition instructors. First, over the last several decades, composition scholars have attempted to find out whether knowledge from the composition classroom transfers into other contexts, in what situations this kind of transfer occurs, and how composition instructors can foster it. The second quote speaks to ever-increasing language diversity among student populations at U.S. colleges and universities. While many composition instructors continue to proceed from a default

assumption of what Matsuda calls “linguistic homogeneity” in the classroom, at this point, it is necessary to assume that diversity is the default (637). Similarly, it is common for instructors, both in composition studies and in the disciplines, to view students whose native languages are anything other than Standardized American English primarily as possessing language deficits that must be overcome. However, while multilingual students may experience challenges that differ from those experienced by their monolingual peers, it is equally true that they bring unique strengths to the writing classroom that they may draw upon as they prepare to enter other contexts. The use of writing-about-writing (WAW) assignments in linguistically diverse college classrooms has the potential to address both of these issues and put them into conversation in ways that could be of great metacognitive benefit to multilingual students.

This piece features excerpts from arguments written by students for whom English is a second or additional language (L2 students) in response to first-year composition (FYC) assignments requiring them to write about writing and other forms of communication. In writing about their experiences and aspirations as they relate to writing and speaking, the students make connections between past, present, and future communicative tasks. The excerpts demonstrate that writing-about-writing assignments designed for linguistically diverse classrooms, or writing-about-multilingual-writing (WAMW) assignments, encourage students to think critically about expectations and opportunities for knowledge transfer in college writing and to draw upon their language backgrounds as resources as they prepare for communicative challenges that they will face throughout and beyond their academic careers.

Specifically, the student excerpts featured here indicate that WAMW assignments encouraged students to articulate the following insights: 1) expectations for communication vary according to the audience and context one is addressing; 2) seeking the guidance of experienced community members is essential when learning to communicate in a new context; 3) differing expectations for communication across cultures often lead to miscommunication; and 4) a discourse community's standards and norms can be changed with appropriate interventions in order to achieve shared goals.

## **Transfer, Language Diversity, and the Writing-about-Writing Approach to FYC**

A common assumption about first-year composition (FYC) classes is that students will learn a set of writing skills and practices there that they can apply in other academic and professional contexts. However, studies conducted over the last three decades have revealed that transfer of knowledge and skills gained in FYC into other contexts is unlikely to occur unless instructors specifically work to promote transfer and make this an explicit goal in the class. For example, two different well-known case studies of native-English-speaking undergraduates writing for classes across disciplines reveal little positive transfer of writing knowledge (Beaufort, McCarthy). Bergmann and Zepernick also find that in focus group discussions, first-year undergraduates did not credit English classes with preparing them to write in other disciplines because of the perceived difference between writing in composition classes, which they saw as personal and subjective, and writing in the disciplines, which they saw as technical

and to the point (129). Similarly, Nelms and Dively identify factors that faculty across disciplines commonly perceive as “roadblocks to the transfer of composition knowledge,” including the compartmentalization of knowledge and the specificity of disciplinary vocabulary (228).

Understanding that transfer does not happen automatically, other scholars have turned to the question of how composition instructors and writing program administrators can revise their curricula in ways that facilitate it (Carillo, Downs and Wardle, Yancey et al.). Salomon and Perkins’s distinction between low-road and high-road transfer has been central to these efforts. “Low-road transfer,” according to Salomon and Perkins, “primarily reflects extended practice” and happens habitually as a result of such practice. “High-road transfer, on the other hand, depends on the mindful abstracting of knowledge from a context” (115). They offer as an example of low-road transfer the movement from driving a car to driving a truck. While driving a truck for the first time may seem unfamiliar, “on the whole, the transition from car to truck is quite painless and automatic; your old skills only require some fine tuning to suit the context of truck driving” (117). As an example of high-road transfer, they describe the practice of counting to ten in order to avoid tantrums as a child, then in adulthood actively searching for a strategy to curb the tendency to impulse buy, remembering the count to ten strategy, and consciously applying it successfully (118). The authors recommend that the capacity for abstraction that high-road transfer requires can be facilitated through pedagogy that emphasizes metacognition.

Downs and Wardle have developed one such strategy, the “Introduction to Writing Studies” approach to composition instruction, often referred to as “Writing about Writing”

(WAW). This approach is based on the argument that part of the reason for the lack of transfer of writing knowledge from FYC is the overly rigid view of academic writing often portrayed in FYC classes, which is not upheld in other contexts (558). While FYC often leads students to believe that good writing possesses a standard set of features, definitions of good writing vary greatly with audience and context. Expectations for structure, citation, use of evidence, and the like will not be the same in an engineering course and a literature course, for example. Given the impossibility of teaching students how to produce good writing in all situations, Downs and Wardle recommend a revised approach to composition instruction that promotes meta-awareness of writing related concepts: “The course includes many of the same activities as current FYC courses: researching, reading, and writing arguments. However, the course content explores reading and writing: How does writing work? How do people use writing? What are problems related to writing and reading and how can they be solved?” (558). The “Introduction to Writing Studies” approach transforms the composition classroom from a “skills” course with no inherent content to a course that introduces students to the disciplinary content of composition studies.

WAW addresses many of the challenges that instructors commonly face when teaching linguistically diverse student populations. The topics from popular culture or current events often assigned in FYC courses are consistently problematic in these settings because while such topics may be accessible and interesting to students who have lived most or all of their lives in the U.S., they are often unfamiliar to international students and late-arriving resident students.<sup>1</sup> In addition, these approaches do little to honor the unique language knowledge that L2 students

bring to the classroom, which may include heightened awareness of grammatical concepts and familiarity with a variety of rhetorical traditions, or to address the unique challenges they face as they tackle college-level academic writing in a second language. The WAW approach addresses these gaps by introducing students to the disciplinary content of composition studies, aiming to help them think about writing as social and highly contextual as opposed to monolithic (Downs and Wardle 558). While this is important for all students, it is perhaps even more important for L2 students due to differences between preferences for academic writing at the sentence, paragraph, and document levels across the cultural contexts they have traversed.

Scholars in L2 writing have been advocating for approaches to composition instruction that explicitly articulate the demands that L2 student writers face across contexts and provide strategies for addressing those demands since at least the 1990s. Silva, for instance, argues that linguistically diverse first-year writing courses need not incorporate content from other disciplines because “there is an abundance of information about writing that teachers can and should share with ESL writers” (361). Johns recommends that FYC instruction focus on the relationship between texts and the various communities within which they function (16). Zawacki and Habib argue for the value of assigning reflections not only in FYC but across disciplines to help promote the transfer of knowledge across academic and cultural contexts. Canagarajah urges composition instructors to focus in part on helping students to strategically incorporate non-dominant varieties of English into their academic writing (“The Place”). For these reasons, emerging scholars in second-language writing have begun to explore the possibilities of adapting WAW for multilingual populations. For instance, in a recent CCCC

presentation, Montgomery, Simnitt, and Wilber coined the term writing about multilingual writing (WAMW) in order to consider how multilingual writers engage with writing studies readings. Ives, Silvester, and Simnitt built on that research in a subsequent presentation to consider whether and how multilingual writers recognize and articulate the ways in which they adapt previous language and literacy experience in new writing situations.

I designed the FYC course described here following a WAMW approach to encourage students to identify ways that social factors impact expectations for communication, reflect on times when they have drawn upon previous language and literacy experiences in unfamiliar communicative contexts, and anticipate how they might continue to adapt their knowledge as they enter and work to influence new discourse communities. In other words, to facilitate transfer, I wanted to encourage my students to think about when and how they have transferred knowledge in the past and about what social factors enable and constrain reuse of prior knowledge. Specifically, drawing on DePalma and Ringer (“Toward”), I wanted to provide opportunities for students to consider three types of transfer: transfer as reuse, negative transfer, and adaptive transfer.

DePalma and Ringer cite Nelms and Dively’s definition of transfer as “the application of knowledge acquired in one situation or context to a different situation or context” (215) as representing the most common understanding of transfer in composition studies. They point out the limits of this definition of transfer as *reuse*, arguing that it “deflects writing specialists’ attention away from the moves students make to *reshape and reform* learned writing skills to fit new tasks” (DePalma and Ringer, “Toward” 137). Another conception of transfer they discuss is

“negative transfer,” which can refer to the inappropriate use of prior knowledge in a new context. In L2 contexts, this term often refers to the interference of syntactic features or rhetorical conventions from the L1 in work done in the L2. This concept has been commonly used to help students respond appropriately to audiences within new cultures. It has also been critiqued for various reasons, among them the fact that it ignores the agency of writers (DePalma and Ringer, “Toward” 138). Finally, DePalma and Ringer add to this list the concept of “adaptive transfer,” which they define as “*the conscious or intuitive process of applying or reshaping learned writing knowledge in order to help students negotiate new and potentially unfamiliar writing situations [emphasis in original]*” (135). Adaptive transfer certainly applies to L1 writing, but it is especially important in L2 writing contexts because it allows for the possibility that students can deliberately draw upon their L1 as a resource for communicating in their L2, thereby promoting a difference-as-resource as opposed to a difference-as-deficit approach to L2 writing (Canagarajah, *Critical* 218). Student artifacts from the three WAMW-based sections of an FYC course designated for L2 students that I taught in Spring 2015 suggest that this approach encourages students, first, to reflect on whether and how these three types of transfer have occurred for them and, second, to think about communication in ways that align with various qualities that DePalma and Ringer attribute to adaptive transfer.

## **Writing about Multilingual Writing at a Private Technical University**

This class was taught at a private university best known for its focus on aviation. The university has one mandatory 100-level FYC course, which focuses on secondary research-based



academic argument. Based on a placement test for which they write a short essay, most students are placed directly into the 100-level FYC course or into a developmental writing course that precedes it. Each semester, at least one section of developmental writing and several sections of the 100-level FYC course are designated for students who use English as a second or additional language (L2 students). Most students who enroll in the L2 FYC course are international students, with high percentages coming from South Korea, India, China, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Nigeria. International students who did not graduate from an English-medium high school must receive a minimum score of 79 on the TOEFL iBT or 6 on the IELTS, indicating that they are at least high intermediate users of English. In addition, their placement into the L2 FYC course indicates that the students are strong academic writers who are likely to benefit from writing instruction designed specifically for L2 students.

With this population in mind, I redesigned three L2-designated sections of FYC to follow a WAMW approach to assignments that aligned with the department's requirements for all FYC courses. FYC students at this institution are required to write top-down, thesis-driven arguments that document sources in MLA style and explicitly acknowledge and respond to possible counterarguments. The primary research commonly used in WAW assignments (i.e. observation and interview research) is not permitted in this course. Abiding by these constraints, I designed three short assignment sequences centered on assigned readings and one longer sequence for which students conducted independent library research and wrote longer argumentative essays. The goals for each respective sequence were as follows:

- Build a shared vocabulary that will help students to think and write about writing.

- Discuss similarities and differences in expectations for writing across disciplines, as well as similarities and differences in students' strategies for communicating in diverse situations.
- Consider how cultural factors impact expectations for communication.
- Research and make arguments in response to communication-related questions of students' choice.

The purpose of the first sequence was to develop a shared vocabulary, or metalanguage, with which to talk about communication, as Johns recommends (128). The terms covered during this sequence included genre, discourse community, jargon, and register. Within the first few days of the semester, I led a discussion about the terms “genre” and “discourse community” guided by a PowerPoint presentation. Because most students are familiar with the word “genre” as it relates to texts like movies and music, I began with that term, building upon what students already knew about popular genres and moving into written genres used in academic and professional communities. The definition provided in the PowerPoint specified that genres help writers and readers to communicate with each other more efficiently, respond to the needs, goals, interests, and worldviews shared by people in groups, and often follow familiar patterns. This description was drawn from Miller’s foundational definition of “genres as typified rhetorical actions based in recurrent situations” (159). This point transitioned into the term “discourse community,” which I defined, drawing on Swales, as any group of people who communicate about specific topics for well-defined reasons. In the introductory discussion, students listed examples of discourse communities to which they belong and later named some genres that are

important in one community and explained why those genres are needed. This led into later discussions of related terms such as jargon and register. Students read and discussed excerpts from the chapter on discourse communities from Johns's book, *Text, Role, and Context: Developing Academic Literacies*, and the sequence culminated in a one-point argument about a discourse community to which students already belonged, for which they responded to this question: "What is the most important thing to understand in order to communicate effectively in this discourse community?" This allowed students to write about a familiar community in order to explore the new writing-related concepts that informed later sequences.

For the second sequence, students read and responded to McCarthy's 1987 article, "A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing Across the Curriculum," which recounts the experiences of one native-English-speaking student, "Dave," writing for courses in three different disciplines: freshman composition, cell biology, and poetry. One purpose of this assignment was to encourage students to consider whether and how opportunities for knowledge transfer across different academic discourse communities exist for college students. While I did not define the term transfer for my students, the prompt questions to which they responded (described below), encouraged them to write about these concepts in layman's terms.

Especially in linguistically diverse classrooms, discussions of audience and genre should focus not only on the ways in which discourse communities' values and goals shape expectations for written genres but also on the ways in which different cultures' norms impact readers' expectations for communication. For this reason, for the third sequence, students read Boiarsky's 1995 article, "The Relationship between Cultural and Rhetorical Conventions," which refers to

examples of professional writing to illustrate ways in which expectations for the same genre can vary across cultural contexts.<sup>2</sup> This sequence culminated in a short response essay where students made arguments about the relationship between culture and communication.

While I knew that the assigned readings would be challenging for students, their TOEFL or IELTS scores combined with their placement exam results indicated that these readings would not be beyond their reach. Before they began the first assigned reading, we discussed strategies for reading difficult texts. Also, in order to ensure they understood the material, I required students to respond informally to selected quotes for homework, and we discussed their responses in class. This helped prepare them to read and analyze texts they located themselves for the final research paper, for which they posed a communication-related question of their choice and wrote a longer argument based on their findings.

## Research Process

For this IRB-exempt study, I distributed consent forms at the end of the semester asking students' permission to use the arguments they had written throughout the semester for research purposes. Across the three sections, forty students granted me permission to analyze the written work they had produced throughout the semester. I read through each argument looking for moments of growth, insight, and struggle, paying close attention to their awareness (or lack thereof) of the social function of academic writing. As I read, I noted themes that emerged across multiple essays. The themes that emerged spoke to the three conceptions of transfer identified by

DePalma and Ringer (“Toward”) and suggest that WAMW assignments encourage students to think critically about the variety of communicative contexts that have faced or hope to face and strategically draw upon knowledge learned in one domain in order to address communicative challenges in other domains.

## Limited Opportunities for Transfer as Reuse

In their written responses to McCarthy’s article, several students expressed frustration with the lack of opportunity for transfer as reuse of writing knowledge from one college class to the next. McCarthy identifies Dave’s inability to reuse writing knowledge gained in one class when completing assignments for another class as the reason for her article’s title, “A Stranger in Strange Lands,” noting that, “In each new class Dave believed that the writing he was doing was totally unlike anything he had ever done before. This metaphor of a newcomer in a foreign country proved to be a powerful way of looking at Dave’s behaviors as he worked to use the new languages in unfamiliar academic territories” (234). One prompt question for the response essay asked students to argue for or against that belief: “Is Dave’s perception that there are no similarities between writing assignments for classes in different disciplines correct? Why or why not?” Many students agreed with Dave’s view that no similarities exist between writing assignments for different classes. In his response, Victor<sup>3</sup> expresses frustration with the lack of similarity between writing assignments for different classes, wondering, “what if there were a better way to take advantage of the skills gained in each course. Will be, if all teachers that ask

for essays, have the same teaching method for writing papers.” Minh echoes Victor’s frustration in a bit more detail, observing that, “despite being given rubrics and marking schemes, students cannot utilize them effectively to meet teachers’ requirements, but instead tend to develop their own ways of guessing what the teachers want and attempt to please them. At a result, students never feel being in control of the game when it comes to writing.” These comments point toward the view that success in writing involves figuring out what the teachers want and giving it to them, as Dave recommends (McCarthy 233), often without considering the disciplinary influences on the teachers’ expectations.

However, other responses indicate that some of the students did gain an understanding of why writing assignments cannot be the same across contexts. Ingrid, for instance, observes that “each subject and professor have their own writing styles, structures and formats,” while Lise recognizes that professors grade writing assignments strictly “in order to test students, understand their capabilities and see if they have sufficient knowledge of the discourse community they are engaging in.” Later in his essay, Minh shows that he in fact does understand why assignments cannot be the same across contexts, noting that “Academic disciplines have many different purposes, areas of study, genres and languages for communication, making their writings much diverge.” As an example of how differences in expectations across discourse communities can act as barriers to transfer, he identifies the use of two different systems of measurement for essentially the same concept in theoretical physics and engineering, lamenting, “I am often tangled between SI [System International] and ES [English System] units when writing a project report.”

These students observe minimal opportunities for transfer as reuse, perhaps overlooking important similarities, just as Dave does (McCarthy 245). However, in explaining the reasons for that lack of opportunity, Ingrid, Lise, and Minh demonstrate the rhetorical quality of adaptive transfer. DePalma and Ringer characterize adaptive transfer as “*rhetorical*, meaning that it takes place when a writer understands that the context, audience, and purpose of a text influence what is suitable . . .” (“Adaptive” 46). Responding to McCarthy’s article led them to articulate that expectations for writing will vary across disciplines because disciplinary differences necessitate different written conventions. When faced with future writing tasks, these students may look for ways in which disciplinary conventions impact communicative practices in order to adapt their communication to new disciplinary contexts.

## **Examples of Adaptive Transfer Support the L2 Metaphor**

In addition to reflecting on limited opportunities for transfer as reuse, in their responses to McCarthy, several students recounted times when they engaged in adaptive transfer by reshaping learned communicative knowledge to “negotiate new and potentially unfamiliar writing situations” (DePalma and Ringer, “Toward” 135). Several examples of this appear in student responses that argue for the validity of what Matsuda and Jablonski call the L2 metaphor. McCarthy is one of several writers in composition studies to compare a native English-speaking student entering a new discourse community to a traveler entering a foreign country. Matsuda and Jablonski argue that the L2 metaphor “can mask the complexity of second-language learning and can lead to the marginalization of second-language writers.” I presented this viewpoint to my

students, in part to problematize McCarthy's argument, and invited them to consider it in their responses with this prompt question: "Is entering a new academic discourse community and learning its language similar to entering a foreign country and learning that country's language, as McCarthy argues? Why or why not?" To illustrate why the L2 metaphor is valid, students described similarities between new situations that have allowed them to draw upon the knowledge they have gained from traversing multiple languages and cultures to communicate successfully in new discourse communities.

Several students argued that the L2 metaphor has some validity because both learning a new language and learning to communicate in a new discourse community necessitate breaking down new communicative demands. Kyung, for example, argues that, "Discourse community may have many unfamiliar jargons and neologisms created by the group and distinctive communication style to communicate effectively the group. Hence, it will be very similar to learning a new language which has different vocabularies and different communication or writing style." He offers as an example his experience participating in the model UN at his international high school, explaining that "Although, we were speaking English, the way of using the language was very formal that I felt I was learning a completely new language." Kyung understands that in order to communicate effectively in a new and unfamiliar situation, be it a new country or a new discourse community, it is necessary to discern expectations for communication at multiple levels. Not only must one learn about words unique to that community but also the preferred style, which includes, as he points out, level of formality. Because he has learned to pay attention to vocabulary and style as reflected in sentence structure,



organizational patterns, and register from his past experiences, Kyung is prepared to adapt this strategy in each new rhetorical situation to determine the most effective way to communicate there.

Some students pointed out another strategy that can be adapted in multiple contexts: seeking guidance from others. Kenzou argues that learning to communicate in a new discourse community is similar to learning a new language because “acquiring language [in both cases] is both social and personal activity.” To illustrate that social interaction is necessary to learn a new discourse community’s language, he cites Dave’s ease in learning the languages of cell biology and freshman composition, where he interacted frequently with his teachers and peers, in comparison with the difficulty he experienced learning the language of poetry analysis in his lecture-based poetry class (McCarthy 257). He adds that, “Similarly, in a foreign country, relationships with people matter. When an individual is close to other people who speak a different language, the person is highly likely to learn the language quickly.” Along the same lines, Young Jae compares learning to communicate in a new setting, be it a new country or a new discourse community, to learning the rules of a sport under the guidance of a coach: “In order to play in the football team, the player have to know the game rules. After he knows the rules, coach will now put him into the training program. Training program is the next step to learn a foreign country’s language and a discourse community’s language.” Although he doesn’t fully unpack the metaphor to explain what might be equivalent to a sports training program in a new country or discourse community, Young Jae has clearly learned from past experiences that in any new communicative situation, it is necessary to begin by learning the basics and slowly

move toward application of knowledge under the guidance of seasoned members of the community. When faced with unfamiliar communicative situations, students like Kenzou and Young Jae will likely draw upon this knowledge and seek relationships that will help them make sense of the social environment to which they must respond.

Like the students in the previous section, these students illustrate the rhetorical nature of adaptive transfer and describe strategies for determining how to respond to those rhetorical elements that they can use whenever they enter a new communicative context. These strategies align with DePalma and Ringer's characterization of adaptive transfer as dynamic: "[A]daptive transfer is *dynamic*, because it is premised on the notion that writing practices learned in one context may be reused or reshaped in another, thus allowing space for change and fluidity" ("Adaptive" 46). Kyung recognizes that each new community will have important differences from other communities to which the communicator must adapt but that those differences will correspond to predictable categories such as vocabulary and style and reflect audience preferences and communicative purpose. Therefore, he knows that he must ask questions about expectations in these areas to successfully communicate in new situations. Similarly, Kenzou and Young Jae recognize that newcomers to any community will benefit from seeking mentoring relationships with seasoned members of that community because those mentors can help them understand and respond to new rhetorical factors. The strategies of seeking mentorship and asking questions about audience, vocabulary, and style, can be reused in multiple contexts to help the students communicate successfully with each new audience.

## **Adaptable Observations about Negative Transfer**

Students again positioned themselves as adaptable communicators by further demonstrating the understanding that “the context, audience, and purpose of a text influence what is suitable” (DePalma and Ringer, “Adaptive” 46) in their essays for the third assignment sequence, which focused on the relationship between culture and communication. The article by Boiarsky that students read for that sequence covers topics from contrastive rhetoric, the study of differences in rhetorical conventions across cultures, which has been criticized for a range of valid reasons, including the limited sample of texts upon which its findings have been based, its assumption of a deterministic relationship between culture, language, and perception, its lack of recognition of variance in rhetorical conventions within a culture due to individual, contextual, and generic differences, and its failure to recognize similarities between cultural rhetorics (DePalma and Ringer, “Toward,” Kubota, Leki).

However, if instructors acknowledge these complexities and present work in contrastive rhetoric as fuel for discussion and not absolute truth, its use in the L2 FYC classroom can be productive. In introducing this sequence, I made sure to point out some of the criticisms that have been leveled against contrastive rhetoric, and a few students took a critical stance toward Boiarsky’s claims. Many students were less critical in their responses in part because Boiarsky’s claims and examples struck them as familiar.

Several students who chose to support or refute Boiarsky’s claim that “people write and interpret messages according to their particular culture” (246) wrote about times when they have experienced miscommunication due to the negative transfer of communication styles or even

definitions of individual words from one culture into another. For example, Minh claims that “diverse cultures sharing little in common often misunderstand one another due to their distinguished rhetorical traditions, practices and customs.” Alif offers a personal example to support a similar claim, explaining, “My native language is Arabic. Arabic writing is very poetic and inductive, meaning that suspense must be built before stating main point. In contrast, English writing is direct and straight to the point. This contradiction leads me to interpret English texts as dull and dry. Therefore, switching back and forth between the two languages causes some confusion.” Ximena provides two examples of Spanish words that are interpreted differently in different Spanish-speaking cultures, concluding that with “[a] single word or a sign meaning may change, so that causes a bad impression.” Luciano effectively sums up these examples’ significance when he argues that “[i]t is possible for two or more people raised in different cultures to hear the same message and draw opposite conclusions, with neither being right or wrong.” These arguments again align with the rhetorical quality of adaptive transfer because they demonstrate the understanding that any text depends upon its users to give it meaning and that attempts at communication between interlocutors from different backgrounds, cultural in this case, can lead to miscommunication. Given this, the students know that research into cultural norms will help them to avoid unnecessary miscommunication in new contexts.

Students discussed many of the examples described above, as well as others, in class, and these concerns with miscommunication were fresh in their minds when it came time to choose a research paper topic. As the next section will show, addressing the topic of miscommunication in the field of aviation led some students to put what they had learned in FYC into conversation

with knowledge from other classes for the purpose of addressing pressing problems in a target discourse community.

## Transforming Genres in the Multilingual Field of Aviation

Just as the students quoted above show evidence of adaptive transfer in reflecting on past experiences, several students also demonstrate adaptability in anticipating communicative tasks they will face in the future. This is especially noticeable among students who wrote their research papers for an audience within the aviation community. Given the opportunity to choose a topic, it was not surprising that many aeronautical science majors would choose to write about aviation, the topic about which they are most passionate. The one constraint students had to meet when choosing a topic was that their research questions must relate to communication. The students' interest in aviation combined with the communication requirement led them to engage in a form of high-road transfer Nowacek calls "*integrative learning*," or "intentional and positive acts of connection-making" (34), by putting information gained in FYC into conversation with information they had learned in their aviation classes to address the pressing problem of fatal miscommunication in aviation.

More specifically, these students take the understanding of genre "as social action, or as typified rhetorical response within recurrent (socially-constructed) situations" (Freedman 272), which they learned in FYC, and extend that understanding from the written genres we discussed in class to the highly specialized, typified spoken genres common among pilots and air traffic controllers. They recognize those genres as tools used within that discourse community to

achieve well-defined purposes. They also draw on their backgrounds as communicators who have successfully crossed linguistic and cultural boundaries and their insights into ways those backgrounds impact the interpretation of texts of as sources of authority within the international and multilingual aviation community. In so doing, they enact adaptive transfer as multilingual and transformative (DePalma and Ringer, “Adaptive” 47).

Knowing that people use genres to get things done within discourse communities and that those genres evolve to suit the changing needs of the communities within which they work, in their papers, three students analyze spoken genres in aviation and recommend ways the aviation community might revise its spoken genres to ease communication across cultural and language barriers, thereby increasing safety. They cite airline accidents caused by miscommunication and make recommendations for improving intercultural communication in order to avoid such disasters.

Sebastian, for instance, recommends that the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) revise its list of standard codes to prevent ambiguity and increase safety. Acknowledging that standards already exist for recurrent situations in aviation such as clearing for takeoff, he argues that they are not rigid enough to ensure understanding:

For example, when ready to takeoff, a pilot can say “Cleared for takeoff runway 7L at November 5.” Another pilot may say “Cleared runway 7L,” and another one “Cleared for takeoff.” Although the three calls are correct, they sound different and can cause miscommunication problems, and they actually have caused problems in the past. It

would be better if there was just one official way to call the control tower, which would make miscommunication almost impossible.

His argument further emphasizes that chances for miscommunication in situations like this are exacerbated by the diversity among pilots and air-traffic controllers, despite the use of a common language, because “English is spoken very differently around the world and it is impossible to be familiar with all the different words and expressions that exist . . .” He supports this by referring to his own experiences hearing unfamiliar words while flying despite being very familiar with English as it is used in aviation.

Emmanuel takes the opposite approach, arguing that aspiring pilots should learn a second language in order to communicate on an international stage. English is the international language of aviation, so native speakers of other languages must at least learn standard aviation phrases in English, but Emmanuel recommends that they go beyond this because “With only the standard phraseology it is not possible to communicate effectively, especially under situations where more than basic English is needed and effectiveness plays a crucial role.” He argues further that native English speakers should study the languages of the countries where they regularly fly because it will enable them to better understand aviation professionals using English as a second language, thereby decreasing the likelihood of deadly misunderstanding. To better avoid disasters, he reasons that native English speakers should make the effort to understand the linguistic perspectives of their co-workers.

Finally, Kenzou told me that reading Boiarsky’s article led him to think about his culture and that culture’s communicative conventions from a new perspective. He put that new

perspective into conversation with questions about miscommunication in aviation for his final project by citing examples of airline accidents caused by culturally mandated communicative practices. Specifically, he explains that the cockpit requires direct and efficient communication, but the need to observe hierarchy and show deference to superiors in some cultures and the pressure to avoid making mistakes in others have caused deadly accidents. He argues that “As the level of clarity in conversations depends on mental states and cultures, an open, direct communication style should be standardized and imposed in aviation.” He reasons that despite the discomfort that some pilots will inevitably feel shirking their cultures’ norms, “The cockpit should be of another culture where direct communication is a part of its custom because the priority is always safety.”

In their arguments about communication in aviation, these students adapt rhetorical knowledge to fit new situations, demonstrating the transformative and multilingual qualities of adaptive transfer. DePalma and Ringer argue that “adaptive transfer is *transformative*” in that it “allows for the possibility that newcomers working with a genre might act as brokers who introduce new ways of seeing, doing, or knowing into practice” (“Adaptive” 47). Sebastian, Emmanuel, and Kenzou all consider ways that not only individuals but entire communities can intentionally alter their communicative practices to achieve the shared goal of increased safety. Although they are merely using concepts they learned in FYC to complete an FYC assignment, the students take the concepts of “genre” and “discourse community” and extend them beyond FYC by integrating them with knowledge from aviation in order to address problems in that professional context. In addition to being transformative, “adaptive transfer is *multilingual* in that



it . . . recognizes the agency of writers to draw from among a variety of discourses and languages in order to influence contexts of writing” (DePalma and Ringer, “Adaptive” 47). While they do not necessarily bring words, sentence structures, or organizational patterns from their L1s into their writing, Sebastian, Emmanuel, and Kenzou certainly draw upon their experiences traversing cultures and interacting in multicultural, multilingual settings for the background knowledge necessary to articulate their arguments and make them with confidence. Thus, these examples point toward WAMW’s potential to encourage students to think strategically about the communicative tasks they face. They also point toward WAMW’s potential to facilitate a new conception of transfer that positions multilingual students as agents with a wealth of knowledge that they can draw upon strategically rather than a language deficit that needs to be remediated.

## Conclusion

These findings indicate that WAW approaches can be adapted successfully to fit the needs of linguistically diverse student populations. Writing about written and spoken genres gave the students quoted above the opportunity to reflect on past communicative experiences and consider ways in which those experiences can and do inform their rhetorical choices throughout and beyond their university careers.

While these findings are promising, there are several limitations to this study. First, writing samples were collected from a small number of participants, forty in all. Furthermore, the study focused on only one institution. Finally, the study was limited to only one semester, so it is unclear whether and how the students applied the knowledge they gained from the course when

communicating in new contexts. All of these limitations point toward the need for future research on WAMW assignments.

My readings and assignments were designed to respond to my own institutional context and would certainly not be appropriate for every FYC course. However, fields like composition studies, L2 writing, and applied linguistics offer a vast collection of materials from which instructors can pull to design WAMW curricula that meet the demands of their programs and address the experiences of their students. In addition to written discourse and its relationship to academic, professional, and civic discourse communities, readings and assignments might focus on the tension between conformity and innovation within these settings, ways expectations for communication vary across cultures within and beyond the US, the rhetorical function of “standard” and “nonstandard” varieties of English, and other related topics.

For instructors interested in implementing WAMW assignments in FYC courses, it is important to be explicit about this approach and the rationale for it in order to create buy-in. My syllabus includes an explanation of the WAMW approach to composition instruction, and I also go over it on the first day of class and answer questions. Also, because academic articles like the ones I assign are difficult for students, it is helpful to provide them a good deal of guidance as each text is assigned. I usually introduce the readings by connecting them to our overall course goals. In some cases, I cover the writer’s purpose and research methodology in class and make those sections optional so that students can focus on the results. In addition, reading guide questions help students to pick out important information from these dense texts. With sufficient guidance, reading and writing about writing can give multilingual students the opportunity to

reflect on ways in which knowledge gained in one context can be adapted when responding to new communicative challenges.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Ferris for definitions of international and late-arriving resident students.

<sup>2</sup> During class workshops of student drafts for the independent research paper, having discussed the impact of cultural conventions on discursive conventions proved to be particularly useful, as the students and I referred back to Boiarsky's article in order to contextualize recommendations for revision. Our WAMW-focused activities, then, encouraged discussion of not only the "what" but also the "why" of the requirements for student writing in FYC.

<sup>3</sup> All student names are pseudonyms.

## Works Cited

- Beaufort, Anne. *College Writing and Beyond: A New Framework for University Writing Instruction*. Utah State UP, 2007.
- Bergmann, Linda S., and Janet Zepernick. "Disciplinarity and Transfer: Students' Perceptions of Learning to Write." *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 31, no. 1-2, 2007, pp. 124-49.
- Boiarsky, Carolyn. "The Relationship Between Cultural and Rhetorical Conventions: Engaging in International Communication." *Technical Communication Quarterly*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1995, pp. 245-59.
- Canagarajah, A. Suresh. *Critical Academic Writing and Multilingual Students*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002.
- . "The Place of World Englishes in Composition: Pluralization Continued." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 57, no. 4, 2006, pp. 586-619.
- Carillo, Ellen C. *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition: The Importance of Teaching for Transfer*. Utah State UP, 2014.
- DePalma, Michael-John, and Jeffrey M. Ringer. "Adaptive Transfer, Writing Across the Curriculum, and Second Language Writing: Implications for Research and Teaching." *WAC and Second-Language Writers: Research Towards Linguistically and Culturally Inclusive Programs and Practices*, edited by Terry Myers Zawacki and Michelle Cox, WAC Clearinghouse and Parlor Press, 2014, pp. 43-67.

- . "Toward a Theory of Adaptive Transfer: Expanding Disciplinary Discussions of 'Transfer' in Second-Language Writing and Composition Studies." *Journal of Second Language Writing*, vol. 20, 2011, pp. 134-47.
- Downs, Douglas and Elizabeth Wardle. "Teaching about Writing, Righting Misconceptions: (Re)envisioning 'First-Year Composition' as 'Introduction to Writing Studies.'" *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 58, no. 4, 2007, pp. 552-84.
- Hall, Jonathan. "WAC/WID in the Next America: Redefining Professional Identity in the Age of the Multilingual Majority." *The WAC Journal*, vol. 20, 2009, pp. 33-49.
- Ferris, Dana R. *Teaching College Writing to Diverse Student Populations*. U of Michigan P, 2009.
- Freedman, Aviva. "Situating Genre: A Rejoinder." *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 27, no. 3, 1993, pp. 272-81.
- Ives, Lindsey, Katherine Silvester, and Emily Simnitt. "What's New in WAW Is WA(M)W! Fostering Adaptive Transfer through Writing about Multilingual Writing." Cultivating Capacity, Creating Change, Conference on College Composition and Communication, 17 March 2017, Oregon Convention Center, Portland, OR. Panel Presentation.
- Johns, Ann M. *Text, Role and Context: Developing Academic Literacies*. Cambridge Applied Linguistics. Cambridge UP, 1997.
- Kubota, Ryuko. "An Investigation of L1-L2 Transfer in Writing among Japanese University Students: Implications for Contrastive Rhetoric." *Journal of Second Language Writing*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1998, pp. 69-100.

- Leki, Iлона. "Cross Talk: ESL Issues and Contrastive Rhetoric." *Writing in Multicultural Settings*, edited by Carol Severino, Juan C. Guerra, and Johnella E. Butler, Modern language Association of America, 1997, pp. 234-44.
- Matsuda, Paul Kei. "The Myth of Linguistic Homogeneity in U.S. College Composition." *College English*, vol. 68, no. 6, 2006, pp. 637-51.
- Matsuda, Paul Kei and Jeffrey Jablonski. "Beyond the L2 Metaphor: Towards a Mutually Transformative Model of ESL/WAC Collaboration." *Academic Writing: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Communication Across the Curriculum*, vo. 1, 2000, [https://wac.colostate.edu/aw/articles/matsuda\\_jablonski2000.htm](https://wac.colostate.edu/aw/articles/matsuda_jablonski2000.htm).
- McCarthy, Lucille Parkinson. "A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing across the Curriculum." *Research in the Teaching of English*, vol. 21, no. 3, 1987, pp. 233-65.
- Miller, Carolyn. "Genre as Social Action." *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, vol. 70, pp. 151-67.
- Montgomery, Jason, Emily Simnitt, and Daniel Wilber. "Whose Writing? For What Purpose?: Taking Action with Writing about (Multilingual) Writing." *Writing Strategies for Action, Conference on College Composition and Communication*, 7 April 2016, Hilton Hotel, Houston, TX. Panel Presentation.
- Nelms, Gerald, and Ronda Leathers Dively. "Perceived Roadblocks to Transferring Knowledge from First-Year Composition to Writing-Intensive Major Courses: A Pilot Study" *WPA: Writing Program Administration*, vol. 31, no. 1-2, 2007, pp. 214-40.
- Nowacek, Rebecca S. *Agents of Integration: Understanding Transfer as a Rhetorical Act*. Southern Illinois UP, 2011.

Salomon, Gavriel, and David N. Perkins. "Rocky Roads to Transfer: Rethinking Mechanisms of a Neglected Phenomenon." *Educational Psychologist*, vol. 24, no. 2, 1989, pp. 113-42.

Silva, Tony. "On the Ethical Treatment of ESL Writers." *TESOL Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1997, pp. 359-63.

Swales, John M. *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*. Cambridge UP, 1990.

Yancey, Kathleen Blake, et al. *Writing Across Contexts: Transfer, Composition, and Sites of Writing*. Utah State UP, 2014.

Zawacki, Terry Myers, and Anna Sophia Habib. "'Will Our Stories Help Teachers Understand?' Multilingual Students Talk about Identity Voice, and Expectations across Academic Communities." *Reinventing Identities in Second Language Writing*, edited by Michelle Cox, Jay Jordan, Christina Ortmeier-Hooper, and Gwen Gray Schwartz, National Council of Teachers of English, 2010, pp. 54-74.