

Ben Rafoth

Book Review: *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers*

Discussed in this review:

Marcy Llamas Senese: *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers*. Boulder, CO: Utah State University Press, 2015. Print.

Ben Rafoth's *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers* presents a compelling argument for increasing the use of second language acquisition (SLA) research in preparing tutors and directors for interaction with multilingual writers. Rafoth's decades of experience at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) in writing centers, composition, and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) brings significant insight to the ongoing conversation about multilingual writers in the field of composition. Informed by Rafoth's own research at seven institutions within and outside the U.S., as well as current research in SLA, applied linguistics and writing center theory, *Multilingual Writers and Writing Centers* provides theoretically grounded strategies for identifying the knowledge required by tutors and directors to support such writers effectively and ethically.

Rafoth describes his approach as "an informed invitation for writing center directors and their tutors, especially advanced tutors, to make greater use of theory and research from the field of second-language acquisition, particularly as it relates to one-to-one interaction, academic discourse and providing corrective feedback" (3). Rafoth carefully examines each of these areas in separate chapters, grounding his analysis in the context of specific writing center sessions.

Chapter One describes tutorial interactions within specific writing centers from around the world, describing the expectations that multilingual writers bring to writing center sessions and tutors' attempts to respond to their needs. Chapter Two considers how the interaction between tutor and student can be made more effective for both by familiarizing the tutor with basic concepts of language acquisition. In Chapter Three, Rafoth explores definitions of academic writing and how its complexities affect multilingual students. The concept of corrective feedback is the focus of Chapter Four, with a detailed discussion of the types of error and how the tutor should respond. Finally, Chapter Five considers what the research reveals about the knowledge tutors need to work with multilingual writers, and how university policies may help or hinder the acquisition of such knowledge. In the Introduction, Rafoth notes that conversations about what actually occurs in a writing center session "do not occur often enough" between tutors and directors, and he argues convincingly that it is crucial to have frequent discussions about "what tutors are trying to help writers accomplish, and what tutors themselves stand to gain from these interactions" (2). Throughout the book, Rafoth reminds the reader again and again of the high stakes that writing represents for multilingual writers, as they attempt to enter the scholarly conversation of academia and succeed in their educational goals.

Particularly useful is the extensive vocabulary from SLA and applied linguistics that Rafoth explains in some detail, applying the concepts within the context of tutoring sessions he has observed. For example, after explaining the linguistic definition of cohesion, "a complex system of lexical and grammatical links writers and readers use to make sense of a text" (7), Rafoth walks the reader through a writing center session in which a native English-speaking tutor and a student for whom Chinese is her first language negotiate how to use referents such as "this one" and "that one" to clearly identify three different types of cell phones being analyzed in the

writer's text. Rafoth notes that “for a nonnative speaker...navigating English's reference system can feel like getting lost in an M.C. Escher drawing, full of twists, turns, and never-ending loops” (9). Rafoth's compassionate understanding of the challenges facing non-native English speakers (NNES), combined with his knowledge of writing center practices and linguistic terminology, allow him to provide an analysis that he believes goes “to the heart of scholarly, professional, and personal responsibilities” of writing center tutors and directors who work with multilingual writers (13).

The use of complex examples of students' and tutors' language and cultural backgrounds and their attempts to negotiate meaning in the tutorial serve to emphasize one of Rafoth's primary arguments: old school writing center tactics are not sufficient to support the multilingual writing centers of today's colleges and universities. Rafoth warns tutors and directors against resorting to “the comfort zone of nondirectiveness, collaboration, and confidence boosting” (136), strategies which may have worked well in a monolingual writing center environment but which are inadequate given the needs of multilingual writers. Rafoth urges directors and tutors to “move beyond the simplistic dichotomy [in writing center theory]—identified a decade and a half ago by Susan Blau, John Hall, and Sarah Sparks (2002)—between global and local errors” (5). Instead, Rafoth suggests that tutors and directors utilize more complex frameworks, such as “academic discourse and its variations by purpose and discipline; ... errors and how to explain them; and ... the struggles and rewards—both their own and others'—of learning and learning about languages” (6).

A striking example of the linguistic diversity of today's university writing centers is revealed by Rafoth's on-site research at Northwestern College, a private Christian liberal arts

institution in Iowa. Rafoth notes that although 93 percent of the town's residents are white, Northwestern's writing center is surprisingly diverse, ethnically and linguistically. As a result, the description of the writing center by Alanna, a tutor from Puerto Rico, sounds more like something we would expect to find in New York City rather than Iowa: Alanna tutors Suraj, a student from Nepal, while Noriko, a first-year student from Japan, works with another tutor who was born in India. In another part of the writing center, Wes, a tutor whose parents are from Mexico and El Salvador, works with Eni, a student from Holland (26). The multiple language abilities and mixed cultural backgrounds of both tutors and students in this example emphasize one of Rafoth's most powerful suggestions: the language backgrounds of writing center tutors should be taken into consideration when hiring and training, given the awareness of language acquisition and language differences that they are likely to have obtained through personal experience.

Defining the multilingual writers who visit our writing centers and inhabit our classrooms has become more and more difficult, as the demographics of higher education increase in linguistic complexity. Rafoth favors Dana Ferris's model, which suggests categorizing university students who are NNES as either international (not born in the U.S. and with no prior schooling here) or resident (not born in the U.S. but having completed some of their high school years here)—also known as Generation 1.5 students (30). But within these broad categories are more shades of complexity, as we consider how much preparation in English international students may have had, how long resident NNES students have been in the U.S., and the degree of acculturation that either group may be experiencing. The linguistic ability levels of such students are not easily gauged, and Rafoth points out that “[i]n many cases multilingual writers have

significantly more grammatical knowledge of English, worldly experience, and advanced literacy in their native language than their native English-speaking tutors do” (13).

Rafoth’s discussion of multilingual writers is supported by others like Pal Kei Matsuda, who reminds us that the presence of multilingual writers in the classroom creates particular challenges for basic writing instructors. Matsuda notes that “[a]s the student population in higher education grows increasingly diverse both linguistically and culturally, the definition of the term ‘basic writer’ is becoming even more complex” (67), and that Generation 1.5 students in particular have not been given sufficient attention in the basic writing literature. While Rafoth does not specifically address the issue of multilingual writers who are identified as basic writers, his in-depth descriptions of effective tutoring strategies for these writers can also be utilized as pedagogical approaches for basic writing instructors, whose classes often contain multilingual writers as well as monolingual native English speakers. In fact, one of the strengths of Rafoth’s book is that his approach is pedagogical in nature, providing techniques that can be utilized not only by tutors, but by writing instructors of all ability levels who work with multilingual writers.

Scholars in the field of SLA “have been working for decades to develop resources and strategies for supporting writing teachers and program administrators in working more effectively” with NNES students (Atkinson, Crusan, Matsuda et. al, 383). Rafoth’s thoughtful and insightful book is one of those resources, appearing at a crucial time in our field’s growth, when composition classrooms—including those for basic writers—are becoming increasingly multilingual. As scholars, researchers, and teachers in the field of SLA have long argued, understanding how to support multilingual writers should be a part of every composition instructor and administrator’s preparation. Thus, Rafoth’s book, while directed towards writing

center professionals, is applicable for all of us as we strive to learn pragmatic, thoughtful methods for supporting the steadily increasing number of linguistically diverse students in our writing classrooms.

Works Cited

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