

RESEARCH NOTE

## From the Writing Lab to the ESL classroom

---

Carla-Marié Spies-Gaum 

ESL Teacher: Intensive English Programme, Language Centre, Stellenbosch University, South Africa  
E-mail: carlamariespies@gmail.com

While completing my postgraduate studies, I worked at Stellenbosch University's Writing Laboratory as a consultant, conducting mostly one-on-one consultations with undergraduate and postgraduate students from various faculties. My time there not only gave me the opportunity to help other students with their writing, but it was also an opportunity for me to learn how to teach and support students in a collaborative way.

In 2014, I attended the Middle East-North Africa Writing Center Alliance's conference *Sustaining Writing and Writing Centers in the Middle East-North Africa Region*, where I learned that there were many similarities between English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching and writing consulting, and realised that teaching ESL was something I would really enjoy doing. The Writing Centre and ESL teaching philosophies are very similar: they both place an emphasis on focusing on the student/learner, encourage collaborative learning, strive to give the student a voice, and set out to empower students by allowing them to take ownership of their own learning. Shortly after the conference, I was offered a part-time job as an ESL instructor, and completed my CELTA training to become a qualified ESL teacher. Currently, I teach English to international students in the Intensive English Programme (IEP) run by the Language Centre at Stellenbosch University, and am grateful to be able to apply the skills I obtained while working as a writing consultant in the ESL classroom.

The ESL classroom, like the Writing Centre, is an interim space, a space between, or a space inside *and* outside a discipline (Daniels, Richards and Lackay 2017: 129). Within the IEP at Stellenbosch University, students from different countries and from various disciplines come together in the classroom with the common goal of improving their English, but also with their own individual goals, for example, to be accepted into a university programme, to be able to complete a research project in English, or to improve their work prospects. And even though the ESL class in the IEP is not confined to a specific academic discipline, it still takes place in an academic environment. Students therefore initially come from the "outside" into what can be seen as my (the teacher's) space – my home country, my classroom, my area of expertise. This immediately puts me in a place of authority and power, which then has to be renegotiated in order to give more power to the students so as to facilitate optimal learning. The classroom is, after all, in actual fact *their* space to learn and grow. Drawing from my training as a writing consultant, I purposefully try to break down barriers in the classroom by creating a space where everyone can move around freely into *each other's* (including the

teacher's) space so that the classroom becomes a place of collaborative learning. Students would, for example, come up to the board (traditionally the teacher's space) to write down answers or I, the teacher, would join students at their desks.

One of the first things I learned as a writing consultant was to build a relationship with every student: to establish a connection, to call the student by his/her name, and to create an environment of trust and support. Although the situation in an ESL classroom with a group of students is less interpersonal and individualised than a one-on-one consultation/lesson, I still make sure to build these connections, and to identify and address students' different interests and needs. We often do "get-to-know-you" activities, and students are often given the opportunity to share their experiences, opinions, and perspectives in writing and speaking tasks. This works very well to help students see how they can apply what they learn in class to their lives, their studies, and their work.

Another way I try to keep our ESL classroom student-centred is to encourage students to use critical thinking skills and resources to discover answers and solutions for themselves, rather than always responding to the students' questions with a direct answer. My Writing Lab experience and training has made me very aware of the power of asking questions, and I will never forget the training session we had on the Socratic method, where we had to see for how long we could continue to answer every question with another question! Nichols (2017: 38) notes that less experienced consultants often want to "prove their authority" and "panic when they realise that they might not know all the answers", whereas "[s]easoned consultants learn that their job is rather to develop the client's authority, to listen to the client's thinking and to help the client to listen to their own voice and to develop their own views in relation to others". Although this kind of "situational" and "non-hierarchical" learning is combined with "positional" (more traditional top-down) learning in the ESL classroom, conducting numerous consultations made me more confident to take a step back in the classroom, reduce my talk time, and to let students take control of their own learning and skills development. It has taught me how to let the students lead the conversation so that their voices can be heard more than mine. One of the mottos of Writing Centres is, after all, to help/teach students how to help themselves: to empower them to become better writers, and not only to improve the piece of writing they are working on at that moment. In the ESL classroom, I remind myself of this every day, and try to help students to not only work on improving their English, but also to become better learners so that they can know how to improve their English outside of the classroom, beyond the textbook and the guidance of a teacher.

Something else that the Writing Lab taught me was that students all learn differently: some are more visual, some need to listen to something, some need to repeat something orally, and some need to write things down. Some students have disabilities or other barriers to learning that can be overcome by adapting teaching and learning styles. Being aware of this and being attuned to students' specific needs and preferences help me a lot in the ESL classroom to guide students towards better learning, comprehension, and retention. During our Writing Lab training, it was always emphasised that we as consultants/tutors/teachers have to remember that even though a student may struggle with and need help in one area (for example, writing an essay or speaking English), they could be – and often are – brilliant at something else. By playing into these strengths and keeping in mind my students' interests and passions, I as an ESL teacher can make the ESL classroom a much more inclusive and welcoming space that

facilitates learning in a way that will empower students to reach their goal of becoming more skilled and confident users of English.

I will always be grateful for the privilege I had of working at the Writing Lab: for how it enriched me as a person, and for how it shaped my approach to teaching. The culture in the Writing Lab was always one of support and empowerment, and our management team – Sharifa Daniels and Rose Richards (heads), and Anne-Mari Lackay (office manager) – always set a great example of how to take a genuine interest in every student who walked through the Writing Lab’s doors, and how to foster mutual respect and encourage collaborative learning during interaction with those students, which I now try to continue to apply in the ESL classroom.

## **References**

Daniels, S., R. Richards and A. Lackay. 2017. The Writing Lab in the centre: A collaborative model for integrating writing consultations in a first-year Engineering module. In S. Clarence, and L. Dison (eds.) *Writing centres in higher education: Working in and across the disciplines*. Stellenbosch: AFRICAN SUN MeDIA. pp. 129–144. <https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928357551>

Nichols, P. 2017. Writing democracy: From writing centres to writing fellows to writing intensive courses in a university-wide writing programme. In S. Clarence, and L. Dison (eds.) *Writing centres in higher education: Working in and across the disciplines*. Stellenbosch: AFRICAN SUN MeDIA. pp. 35–48. <https://doi.org/10.18820/9781928357551>