

## Episode 61: Paul Kei Matsuda

### Transcript

Welcome to Pedagogue, a podcast about teachers talking writing. I'm your host, Shane Wood.

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In this episode, I talk with Paul Kei Matsuda about second language writing programs and classes, resources for teaching second language writers, and the future of second language writing theory and practice.

Paul Kei Matsuda is Professor of English and Director of Second Language Writing at Arizona State University, where he works closely with doctoral students specializing in second language writing from various disciplinary perspectives. Paul is Founding Chair of the Symposium on Second Language Writing and Series Editor of the Parlor Press Series on Second Language Writing. He has published widely on various topics on language, writing and professional development in applied linguistics, rhetoric and composition and TESOL, and has received a number of prestigious awards for his publications. He has been invited to present keynote talks as well as lectures and workshops in various countries and regions across the world.

Paul, thanks so much for joining us.

*SW: You're a leading researcher in second language writing and the Director of Second Language Writing at Arizona State University. How have second language writing programs developed in the U.S., or what's their history? And what are some typical configurations and models of second language writing programs?*

PM: So in the North American higher educational context, second language writing programs typically are attached to, or parallel to first-year composition courses that are typical across the country. These days, the goals and objectives tend to follow the WPA Outcome statement, which is the foundational document for our program. And we have an adapted version of the outcomes statement. So there is an emphasis on writing skills, critical thinking, argument skills and rhetorical awareness. Historically, L2 writing classes were created as a solution to a few international students who happen to be in first-year composition courses. The teachers of these courses didn't know what to do with this population so they segregated them. And sometimes they held students up to certain standards that are unreasonable.

Sometimes they just let them pass. So it was an administrative solution to the practical problem on the teacher's side. And later these programs became a little more professionalized. People who started teaching these had some background in writing and some background in language teaching, and the courses are re-conceptualized to focus more on the students' needs, to provide

the support that students need in order to cope with the challenges of academic writing, both in the first year writing courses and beyond. There have been some unique proposals for different course designs and how to integrate or disintegrate mainstream writing students and second language writing students. The current trend is to mainstream students who want to be mainstreamed, but for students who feel uncomfortable being among native English speakers and who need additional language support to work with other students and instructors who are sympathetic to their unique needs and interests and experiences. Separate sections of composition courses are being offered.

They are typically taught by experienced writing teachers who also have some background in language instruction and working with students from diverse backgrounds. A particular configuration where these programs are located is not so much a pedagogical or theoretical decision, but it's more of a logistic decision of where the expertise is. Sometimes, unfortunately, it's where the money is, pragmatic and financial reasons. And so for institutions where there are separate and strong language programs outside of the English department or writing department, then you may find second language writing programs that are located in a completely different department administered separately by a group of specialists. That degree of communication between writing programs and the mainstream writing programs and second language programs also depends highly on how these programs are...where they're located and how they are being administered by different people and how they get along with each other, or don't get along with each other sometimes.

*SW: What are some of the main challenges within second language writing programs and classes?*

PM: Right. One of the main issues that students encounter is language. Even though they are multilingual and they have different resources that they can use, they are also developing their knowledge and awareness of how the English language is being used and how writing functions in U.S. academic contexts. It's a very different context than what some of the students are used to doing. So having the time and space, as well as the resources and mentors who can help them develop their language resources as they try to adjust to a new learning environment is one of the biggest challenges. There are also students who come from the U.S., so they have been educated in the English dominant high school and community college, but because of their language backgrounds and identity positions, they may or may not fit into any of the existing writing courses. So being aware of the diversity and the range of experiences and language backgrounds that students bring to the classroom is a challenge for the teachers and for the program administrators.

*SW: Paul, I'm interested in how you develop second language writing teachers and how you design curriculum that best supports students and their learning. What kinds of advice do you give and what assignments and assessments do you suggest instructors take up and implement in their second language writing classes?*

PM: So most of the teachers I work with come from different disciplinary backgrounds. Some of them are literature specialists. Some of them are creative writers. Some of them are applied linguists and TESOL specialists. Some of them are writing specialists. They all have their own biases and their own experience. I don't assume specialized knowledge of language teaching for first-year composition teachers who work with second language writers, but I do expect them to have a broad understanding of the rhetorical situation, different genres, and also different contexts in which writing is being used and how it's perceived and how it's received. So awareness of the student population and a wider range of writing practices is essential. And sensitivity to language learning is also important. And one of the things that I've observed over the years is that teachers, both first language speakers and second language speakers who tend to do really well in working with students are not people who have certain types of expertise, but people who actually have experience as language learners. That really helps them put things into perspective as they try to work with second language writers.

In designing assignments, of course, being aware of cultural biases and some of the dominant assumptions, unspoken assumptions about literacy, about ways of arguing, about citation practices, these are also challenging for many teachers. So kind of breaking things down and explaining and raising the awareness of how little things like double spacing papers or using margins, not fully justified, but left justified, I mean, these little conventions. The idea that these little things that we take for granted are new to some students is an eye-opening experience for a lot of teachers. It's not one thing or a set of knowledge that teachers develop, but it's repeated encounters with these little differences and new perspectives that are really important.

So expertise does play a role and people who have strong rhetorical backgrounds, they are good at articulating different aspects of rhetoric, persuasive appeals and audience, and so forth, and people who are coming from language backgrounds are good at articulating and focusing on language issues. But people tend to overdo things and focus on what they're good at and what they're interested in and not have a balanced perspective in terms of what the students need overall. I think even as we use the strengths that we bring to the table, I think it's important to take a step back and reassess what we don't know, and then start to feel comfortable addressing them and also remain uncomfortable. I think Chuck Schuster used to say this, in order to be a good teacher, you have to be comfortable not being fully comfortable. So paying attention to new things that we experience, and then try to do our best in addressing them, knowing that there's always a better way to do the same thing, I think that kind of sensibility is really important for professional development.

*SW: So given what you just said about paying attention to our biases and assumptions, being aware of diverse student populations and their contexts, and also being sensitive to language learning, how do you think writing programs can better prepare future faculty for teaching second language writers?*

PM: Exposing more teachers to the world of multilingual writing and second language writing, I think is a good first step. At ASU, I try to do this systematically. So during the first year,

everyone teaches the mainstream sections of English 101, 102, the first-year composition sequence. Then after that, they can develop additional expertise in professional writing, second language writing and other types of writing. So I'm in charge of providing professional development and mentoring to people who are interested in developing second language writing expertise. After they have taught L2 writing classes, they are exposed to a wider range of issues, assumptions, and challenges, as well as strengths that they may have not seen in mainstream writing courses. They are better prepared to work with a wider range of diversity.

So another thing that I've observed over the years of professional teacher education work is that people who have taught L2 writing tend to be a much better teacher of mainstream writing classes as well, because they are ready to identify issues and questions and possibilities for learning in ways that are not often visible in more conventionalized stagnated contexts. As a program, my goal is to expose more teachers to this new type of perspective, new experience, and then bring them back to the mainstream writing courses, as well as L2 writing courses, so that eventually everyone will be ready to recognize and address specific needs and to tap into the specific strengths that students from multiple linguistic cultural backgrounds bring to the program as a whole.

*SW: What resources do you draw on to help you do this work?*

PM: During the first year of teaching second language writing at ASU, all the teachers will read a book by Dana Ferris and John Hedgcock called *Teaching L2 Composition*. That's a great general resource book, and it's a good combination of lots of theoretical insights and research insights as well as practical hands-on materials. I use that as the baseline so that we will have the shared vocabulary, awareness of shared issues. Then in the mentoring program, our discussion is based on the questions that arise from the classroom, focusing on specific aspects of writing each week. Of course they can bring up any questions that they notice at any time so that we can troubleshoot or address specific issues when it's relevant. So that's one type of resource that we provide.

Another type of resource we provide is a more general introduction to second language writing instruction, and that's an elective course, and many people choose to take it along with or before or after the practicum, more hands-on experience. That one is a more structured overview of different theories and research and issues in teaching second language writing. So we may go over the same material, but with more depth in the theoretical interaction. And then for people who want to further continue their professional development, I'm also offering courses on second language writing with specific focus. Sometimes we focus on writing program administration, sometimes assessment, or next semester I'll be teaching a course that talks about the relationship between L1 and L2 in L2 writing, which intersects with issues of contrastive rhetoric, intercultural rhetoric, translanguaging writing, translation theory, and so on.

Students will have opportunities to develop further expertise within the program. And then we also, as a program, offer workshops, discussion groups on a regular basis so that people can

discuss issues that are pertinent to their experience in interacting with students and student writing. So having multiple layers of ongoing professional development opportunity, I think, is really important. Often I'm invited to go to different universities and provide a one day workshop for writing program faculty, and I think that's a great start, but that's just a sampling of what people might experience. Even though I try to be as comprehensive as possible with these workshops, it's important to have continued opportunities for involvement.

*SW: What do you think is the future of second language writing theory and practice?*

PM: So second language writing started becoming really popular in the U.S. because of the huge presence of international students and also the growth of domestic students with multilingual backgrounds and because of the prevalence of first-year composition across different states and different institutions. But recently it has become more international, writing is something that people are paying attention to for professional purposes, academic purposes. So this is an expanding field of research and teaching. Within the North American context, I spent the first 10 years of my career, and I kept renewing, so more than 20 years, focusing on raising the awareness of that there are different languages, students bring these different language resources, and we need to find ways of helping students develop those resources in ways that are useful for their academic, professional and personal context.

I think after 20 years of work, the awareness is there and the desire to help them is there. I think the language sensibility today is much better than when I started. People are much more open to understanding how people do things differently with different languages and how we can tap into different language resources. But at the same time, the knowledge of how we can be sensitive, how we can create environments where students can flourish without setting up an artificial and somewhat socially awkward assignments or feedback practices or assessment practices. So I think the next step is to create these resources, not just at ASU, not just at other institutions where they are L2 writing specialist, but to make it more broadly available to a wide range of teachers at different levels of professional development. That is a tall order, but I think that would be an important next step in terms of how we can enhance our ability to support and encourage students from different language backgrounds.

*SW: Thanks, Paul. And thank you Pedagogue listeners and followers. Until next time.*