

Episode 57: Todd Ruecker

Pedagogue podcast

Transcript

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

In this episode, I talk with Todd Ruecker about second language writing programs and classes, meeting the linguistic needs of students, and supporting second language writers.

Todd Ruecker is Associate Professor of Rhetoric and Composition and Director of Core Writing at the University of Nevada, Reno. He has taught a variety of courses including first-year composition, professional/technical writing, cross-cultural communication, and the politics of writing instruction. His work regularly crosses disciplinary boundaries and he has published extensively on the transitions of Latinx writers from high school to college. He has received a variety of awards and grants, such as a Fulbright Scholar Grant, and has published articles in respected composition, education, and applied linguistics journals, including *TESOL Quarterly*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education*, *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, and *Writing Program Administration*. He is the co-editor of the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, and has published a monograph and four edited collections.

Todd, thanks so much for joining us.

SW: What are some challenges that writing programs face in serving second language writers, and what are some policies, practices, or procedures that can help overcome those challenges?

TR: Well, one of the first things that comes up is placing students and identifying students. There's been a fair amount of work on...the labels students use to identify themselves is pretty complex. I think back to Ortmeier-Hooper's piece in 2008 that's been pretty influential in the field. I've done some work on that. There's been some additional work in the *Journal of Second Language Writing*. Some students identify with the ESL label or the non-native speaker label, but then other students find that pretty problematic. Like we have a lot of students who grew up in the US speaking multiple languages and don't fit neatly in any one category, but might be served well by a teacher who has training to better support their language needs along with their writing needs. So kind of figuring out how to get those students in the best classes for their needs and that kind of trickles into how we label the classes themselves, then what kind of placement mechanisms we use.

Another challenge that comes up is just finding qualified instructors and teachers to work with second language writers. Our institution it's been traditionally run and taught out of that intensive English program, and they always haven't had the funding they've needed to support and pay full-time instructors. And so it's often then taught by part-time, adjunct labor. By the nature of the exploitation of those positions, [teachers might be] distracted teaching other classes, they

might not have the second language writing expertise that we need to better serve these students. Just in general, ideally, and various people have written about this, like instructors of second language writers should ideally have experience in training in TESOL and applied linguistics and writing studies. Often we find that people have one or the other expertise.

And so if they're just within TESOL, they don't necessarily know how to teach a writing class and provide students with that meta knowledge about writing and the writing process in order to transfer that knowledge into other classes that we find so common and prevalent in terms of the writing instruction today. Understanding of genre theories as well for instance. On the other hand, within mainstream composition programs, there's just often not adequate training. I know there's been a lot of work on translanguaging and everything, and there's a lot there about recognizing and valuing language diversity, but then sometimes it feels very theoretically focused and idealistic to some extent. So people aren't getting training and helping them progress in terms of their linguistic needs. So yeah, it's relatively small and there's few programs who can prepare people within that. Like ASU is one, obviously with people like Paul and the established second language writing program. They have dedicated second language writing graduate seminars there. A lot of places don't have that and so people are kind of left to get that expertise through conferences, through reading and other means. Or maybe the occasional faculty member they can work with on their thesis or dissertation.

SW: So you're talking about meeting the linguistic needs of students. For those unfamiliar with second language writing contexts, I was hoping maybe you could talk more about what those linguistic needs are?

TR: I mean, yeah, our students end up being really diverse in terms of...you might have international students who've gotten a lot of formal training in the linguistic aspects of English and so, can articulate grammar rules and things like that, while you have students growing up in the US who just kind of grew up in an underfunded school system and haven't had necessarily adequate support in either language that they speak or any of the languages that they speak. They just kind of have an intuitive knowledge of the language and might be very fluent in spoken English, but then haven't had the training and support in written English, for instance. And so, I mean, I think having people who understand the differences between the students and how to scaffold assignments to make sure people feel like they have the support and the time needed to succeed alongside all the other students.

And then also providing language feedback. People like Dana Ferris have written a lot about how to provide feedback in a way that's useful and meaningful for students. Like I've seen instructors on different extremes. Like they mark every error on a paper, and we know that that's not helpful or accurate for students. It just kind of overwhelms and demoralizes and they don't learn much from that. On the other hand, we have people who resist any kind of correction and teaching of this "standardized," privileged variety of English at all. I think that does students a disservice. So they just don't have the knowledge to help the students see what's wrong with the sentence. They'll give advice like, "Oh, just read your paper out loud. You'll notice awkward spots." And

some students don't necessarily have that intuitive knowledge where they can read their paper out loud and notice those spots.

Being able to identify things like...again, this is what Ferris has talked about, like those rule governed errors and non-rule governed. Like treatable and non-treatable, I think she called it, where some of it just take a long time. Like articles, they're going to take a long time. Don't spend a ton of time trying to focus a student learning articles unless they're really advanced. But things like verb tenses and the way sentences are structured, things like that can be pretty rule driven. If someone has the knowledge to explain that to students, then students can pick that up more easily.

SW: How can writing programs help support second language writers' transition to college?

TR: I think the first point kind of connects with the last question, but one of the challenges we face is administrators always like to increase class sizes. And fortunately, we've had an administration here recently that has lowered our course caps across all our writing classes to 19, which is more in line of what is recommended by Cs. But I know the norm is more like 24, 25 at most institutions. But for second language writers, they need even a smaller class cap. And that's recommended in the C's Statement on Second Language Writers and Writing, I believe at 15. So that's always a challenge. So yeah, 19 is kind of seen as pretty exceptional compared to a lot of programs, but then pushing down to 15, like...policymakers, administrators often kind of ignore [those recommendations].

Like they try to stand on them, but at the end of the day, they're going to make decisions based on their budgets and their priorities. So I think class sizes, just to provide those different levels of support, because second language writer literacy backgrounds are more complex and they benefit from additional time working on their writing and additional feedback. The way things are structured, especially if someone's teaching 100 students or more a semester, giving everyone the time they need, the feedback they need obviously is problematic at that point. So lowering class sizes would be a big one.

And in terms of thinking about transition to college, like that first year, students are often placed into the large lecture hall courses and so they're coming out of these high schools with very small comparatively class sizes and they know everybody and they come into this overwhelming college environment. The writing classes are really unique in that first year in terms of giving a more personalized experience. That's something that just hearing from students and when we survey students, they find that valuable. Like the retention research that I've written about, a fair amount, too, has always talked about personal connections with students and teachers and professors. And it's hard to do that in a big lecture hall.

We kind of touched on this earlier, but learn about the students' backgrounds, their literacy background, what kind of schools are they coming out of? What kind of writing have they done? Are you serving mostly international L2 students? Are you serving residents? What are their

language backgrounds? How can we as a program build on those language backgrounds as a resource? For instance, I did my PhD at UT El Paso and the vast majority of students there spoke Spanish. It was relatively easy to have assignments where I could ask students who had that fluency to draw on their Spanish literacy background. Just in terms of supporting their transition, I think it's important that we offer a variety of courses as well, or programs. They don't just have to choose between...we put our second language students into the second language section, and then we have just "mainstream section," so here, we have a section with extra lab support for...traditionally have been known as "developmental writers." We end up having a lot of second language writers maybe who grew up in the US placed into those classes. But the important part is that these classes are all credit bearing. I think that's important. So they're kind of equivalent, they just have extra support that the students need. So they're completing their 101 requirement alongside all the other students, but just in a little more specialized class.

I think it's also important that we have diverse staff and teaching staff who reflect the diversity of our students. So students coming in, they can see that their teacher looks like them, talks like them. So trying to diversify our teaching staff as much as possible, just give students that extra level of motivation, especially when they've been told so long that they're not qualified, they're not college material. That they can see here is my teacher. She has a graduate degree, has this expertise, and so I can do that, too. Just collaborating with other people is a big point I always make as well. Like working with your student support services at your institution, collaborating with local high schools to try to figure out how to align your curriculum.

SW: You mentioned an assignment you used at UT El Paso that allowed you to draw on students' rich linguistic histories and habits. Can you talk more about that assignment?

TR: It was kind of a mini lesson leading up to, I think, a genre analysis assignment. So we were doing this kind of mini rhetorical analysis that especially focused on how writers are situated. I picked three news articles on the same topic and they would choose two of them and compare them. So look at how the author was situated and how they were writing about the topic. And so one of those three news articles as the option was a Mexican newspaper. I think it was the Juárez newspaper. One of them was completely in Spanish. So I did have a couple of students who just weren't used to that and came to me like, "How am I supposed to do this assignment? I don't speak Spanish." And I'm like, "Well, then you do these other two. You're a little more restricted since you're not bilingual." So again, little moves like that, that instead of always focusing on our bilingual students as having deficits, figuring out how to position them as having that asset. They have access to more information and more languages.

*SW: In your co-edited book, *The Politics of English Second Language Writing Assessment in Global Contexts*, you focus on high stakes assessment and its impact on second language writers and writing instructors. Can you talk more about the pressures of assessment and what that means for second language writers and teachers?*

TR: One point I made in that book and I've made in other work is that teachers have it a lot harder in the K-12 context, like in terms of mandated state assessments that are very problematic. They're very biased...one of the recent common core exams, even though it was designed in 2010, 2011, 2012, like it was still very biased towards White texts, White authors. It was biased against students based in New Mexico, for instance, and privileged students in other parts of the country. Those can be used pretty punitively blocking students from graduation, reforming schools...and there's been a bit of a backlash. I think that there's some hope for that to start to get better.

They've been using that to evaluate teachers increasingly, as well. Like I did research in New Mexico where I used to live and they had one of the toughest teacher evaluation systems in the country for a while and schools were nervous because their school grade, teachers' individual grades would go down if they were working with these immigrant students who were just here in the US for a few years and were already asked to be taking these high school level tests after I think two years, even though they had just been learning English for two years. So there's definitely...at the college level in general, there's kind of more pressures with accreditation now to assess learning in our classes and things like that.

But by and large, as much as university faculty complain about assessment mandates and pressures, they're pretty benign comparatively. And that may change over time. We'll see. But we have more freedom. I think the biggest thing for students is that the college entrance exams and placement processes are pretty problematic. A lot of people write against the problems with timed writing, with automated essay scoring where all these major tests makers are moving towards. So things like ACCUPLACER, things like the TOEFL. We talk about that in the book a fair amount. Like they don't give an accurate assessment of a student's writing abilities, especially as a second language writer. So that's why I continue to be a big fan of the directed self placement systems and that's something we're moving towards here.

We had kind of an administrative decision not to require ACT and SAT scores. So we're giving students the opportunity to kind of select into their classes and they can still use those test scores if they want, and they have them, but they're not going to be required to do that. I'm kind of excited about that shift away from test scores. I think that's happening more and more. We've seen that in the California schools, I think, which is happening at a bigger scale. More and more embrace directed self-placement, at least multiple measures where you're not just depending on a 30-minute timed essay.

One thing that's coming up is teacher evaluation challenges. Again, we have a lot more autonomy in our departments at universities, but even though we talk about the biases and the problems with them, I see evaluation committees at the department and the college level, they always fall back against these student evaluation numbers. So that is something we have to continue to work to move away from, just because those can sometimes be like a popularity contest. Easier instructors and professors can get higher scores. If you're teaching a certain class that's not required, you're naturally probably going to get higher scores in that. The amount of

biases against women, people of color...this is a book that I'm co-editing with my former graduate student, Mariya Tseptsura, biases against non-native English speaking teachers of English. So we have chapters in there where authors are talking about end of semester evaluations, like this class shouldn't be taught by a second language English speaker or non-native speaker. And then that reflects down in their numbers. So even if they're perfectly qualified, students just read into that and we'll see those negatively. We've got to make sure we're evaluating our teachers fairly and they're not being based on their language backgrounds either.

People have written about this as well, just that pressure of assigning grades to students and kind of being fair. Like I get a question a lot from our newer teachers, like, "How do I grade a second language writer while being fair to all the other students? Do I grade them at the same level? Is that the objective way to do it?" And as we kind of know, like this idea of everyone's at the same level and treat everyone equally isn't fair. It can kind of perpetuate racist grading and assessment practices. And people like Asao Inoue have written a lot about that for instance. Treat an assessment of second language writers differently, focus more on the quality of their writing and their effort, along the lines of labor-based grading practice rather than just based on linguistic error. And so if I do have a linguistic element of my grades, I always recommend that be pretty low, around 10% of the final grade. Whereas maybe in a more traditional writing classroom, especially maybe at the high school level, linguistic errors might be considered more like 40-50%.

SW: This is my last question. How do you negotiate language differences? What practices do you use as a teacher to help you negotiate linguistic varieties and differences in writing classrooms?

TR: So one thing, I'm proud to be trilingual, having learned different languages. I try to make that clear with my students and recognize that that's valuable. I also acknowledge that me being bilingual or trilingual has different connotations in the larger society than an immigrant, because for an immigrant it's often portrayed as a deficit. So I think it's important that writing teachers take the time to learn other languages so they know...I guess teachers who have second language writers, so they know kind of what their students are going through and how hard it is. Like even though I speak these other languages, I'm hard pressed to write in Spanish at a college level. Definitely not in Czech. In Spanish I did take a college level writing class, and so that was kind of a challenge for me. I think it's important that we have that firsthand experience of learning other languages and especially writing in other languages so we can kind of understand what our students themselves go through.

And then I'm also conscious of positioning different languages and language diversity as an asset in the language I use in the classroom and assignment design. I'll use the term second language writer in scholarship, I co-edit the *Journal of Second Language Writing*. So I use it in context like that, but in my classroom, I talk about bilingual, multilingual and kind of lean towards that kind of labeling in classes. So any kind of student-facing language, making sure we're using as asset-based language as possible. When we're doing the research paper, I'll add a line in my assignment or I'll say it in class, "For those of you who are bilingual or trilingual, you're

welcome to bring in texts in other languages. Like you have an asset. You have access to more information because of that.” I'll work in language like that in my assignments as well.

And so, yeah, one question that comes up then, like, if I invite students to analyze other texts, bring in other texts, “What do I do if I don't speak those languages?” The biggest thing, to some extent I try to just trust students and then also kind of draw on, where needed, maybe translation tools to help them. Like, even though it's not perfect, things like Google Translate has come a long way. Kind of alongside that, we talk about footnoting and the politics of footnoting. Like I always push for them to have the original language in the text rather than just give me a translation. And then, footnote the English translation. Like I do want the translation, for me and for the other students peer reviewing, but I always try to relegate that more to a footnote or at least below the original language in texts, if they want to do that. That's something I try to carry through in my scholarship as well. I just got reviewer feedback yesterday. People embrace this nominally, but then when it inconveniences them, then it becomes problematic, reviewers are always like, “It's a nice idea, but it's inconvenient. Just put the English in the text and footnote the original language.” So I'm trying to de-center that in my publications as well, but again, running up against reviewer bias and habits there.

I will say, I have some reservations about the fully translingual approach. As I said earlier, like I think a lot of students coming out of writing graduate programs, composition graduate programs don't necessarily have the expertise to work and serve second language writers fully. And so just reading translingual scholarship, which I think is important and I think it does a lot of good, isn't providing the level of expertise needed. I think you need to also draw on some of the scholarship by people like Dana Ferris as well and Paul Kei Matsuda, for instance. I coauthored a chapter with Shawna Shapiro on this recently, and it's in a collection edited by Tony Silva and Zhaozhe Wang. It brought in a number of second language writing and translingual scholars to kind of explore the divides and try to look for some reconciliation.

Shawna and I like to embrace what we call a “critical pragmatist approach” in the classroom. I'll always be positioning language diversity as an asset. I'm also still teaching and prioritizing to some extent the acquisition of this kind of privileged variety of English, because I think that's what students are coming to us wanting. And then when they get beyond our classroom, they're going to be judged based on that across in their math classes and their engineering classes, their science classes, and when they're applying for jobs as well. So I do provide that. I'm trying more and more to embrace that labor-based approach where I'm kind of minimizing where we're grading students on that and penalizing them for language variations. But I don't fully subscribe to the approach that we can't teach some standards. Alongside that, I have discussions with students about how standards have come into play and how language variety of some are privileged over others.

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