

POISED TO SUPPORT BILINGUAL SPANISH-ENGLISH SPEAKERS

Poised to Support Bilingual Spanish-English Speakers:  
Writing Centers and Composition Instructors

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### Abstract

The number of Latino students enrolling in higher education continues to rise while less than one-third of those enrolled graduate. A primary factor has been underdeveloped literacy skills, creating growing frustration among instructors and students alike. The Writing Center at [the researchers' home institution] has endeavored to develop tailored writing support that meets writing instructors' expectations and promotes the writerly success of our bilingual Spanish-English speaking students. This article recounts the findings from five years of research conducted on the distinctive writing challenges of bilingual Spanish-English speaking students and shares the curriculum developed to address their particular writing needs. Most importantly, this article invites writing instructors to join with writing centers to explore the alignment of writing pedagogy and policy with language research and actual bilingual Spanish-English speaking students' writing needs. A practical guide for orchestrating this partnership is included (see Appendix).

*Keywords:* Bilingual Spanish-English speakers, Writing, Literacy, Metalinguistic Awareness, Writing Center, Post Secondary, Composition Instructors, Instructional Strategies

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Since 2006, the Latino student population has increased 116% on our campus, with our enrollment as the highest percentage of Latino students among all Oregon University System campuses; understandably, the rapid growth engendered pedagogical challenges in first-year writing courses. Frustrated by bilingual students' literacy skills, writing instructors realized they were ill equipped to understand how bilingual Latino students' writing needs differed from the needs of other student populations. The problem, however, was not limited to first-year writing classes: there was a growing trend of writing-related frustration across the curriculum. Instructors were facing the daunting task of researching, designing, and implementing need-tailored pedagogy in response to the growing demand. Overwhelmed instructors soon began sending their students to the Writing Center for assistance.

As a specialized support unit, our Writing Center had historically focused on the literacy needs of domestic and international student populations, providing one-to-one, peer led instruction to assist students in meeting the demands of university writing. Unfortunately, the growing Latino population had gone largely unnoticed, and little had been done to incorporate teaching strategies targeted directly at their specific needs. The trend soon prompted a longitudinal study in the campus Writing Center.

Early in the process, we realized that our population of bilingual Spanish-English speakers needed to be pedagogically distinguished from our domestic and international student populations, yet we also realized that our students did not match the profiles of other Spanish-speaking populations as they were being described by their universities. The majority of bilingual Spanish-English speakers enrolled at our institution share unique features: they were born in the US, and they are *circumstantial* and *functional* bilinguals. As described by Valdés (2006), a circumstantial bilingual is an individual who must proficiently learn an additional language for the purpose of functioning in society, and the functional bilingual is able to participate in a range of linguistic and rhetorical situations in the L1 and L2; oftentimes, however, a functional circumstantial bilingual is unable to read and write in the L1, which adversely affects literacy development in the target language. The international student, on the other hand, is an *elective* bilingual (or multilingual), whose L2 acquisition is a matter of choice for the purpose of personal advancement; most international students are classified as *incipient* bilinguals (or multilinguals) to mark the initial period and process of their target-language acquisition.

We have learned that the majority of our bilingual Spanish-English speakers are stigmatized as college writers. Because they possess oral proficiency in English, they are viewed as mainstream students by their instructors; however, the instructors commonly misunderstand unique and predictable linguistic features prevalent in the written products of bilingual Spanish-English speakers and, thus, penalize them, often severely.

Ferris (2009) provided an introduction to the challenges of bilingual Spanish-English-speaking students in higher education, with particular emphases on *long-term residents* of the United States and composition pedagogy, ultimately arguing for administrators and teachers to acknowledge and adapt to the particular needs of the growing student population. More recently, Ferris, Brown, Liu, and Stine (2011) explored how composition instructors have adapted pedagogy to meet the needs of L2 students. Ferris et al. (2011) described the majority

of instructors in the study as having “no substantive formal training in working with L2 writers” (p. 223) and acknowledged that “L2 writers may have difficulties not easily identified by the untrained eye” (p. 220). Instructors adapted by largely or exclusively focusing on language errors; while some offered selective global and local feedback particular to each student, many admitted to feeling ill-equipped to adapt to L2 students’ needs. Additionally, Ferris et al. (2011) described writing instructors who directed L2 students to seek specialized assistance elsewhere; when turning to academic-support units, however, many of the instructors were met with further frustration as most services were unprepared to effectively support L2 students and, more specifically, bilingual Spanish-English speakers.

Ideally, collaboration between writing faculty and support services would create the synergy necessary to serve L2 students well, and this article describes the kinds of support instructors could be receiving from campus writing centers.

Many writing centers, however, are faced with training challenges that are similar to those of composition programs. As a former writing center consultant herself, Ferris (2009) identified with challenges felt by students and composition instructors as a result of campus writing centers. Ferris (2009) stated, “it is well known that campus writing centers in many contexts cannot or will not provide the kind of specialized support that L2 writers need” (p. 123). As illustration, Ferris recounted the experience of an instructor, whose composition class consisted of 40% bilingual Spanish-English speakers. Resulting from time and TESOL expertise limitations, the teacher directed her students to the writing center. Ferris (2009) wrote the following:

The [bilingual] students were told at the Writing Center that it was “against policy” to give them the sentence-level assistance that they and their teacher were looking for. The teacher, frustrated, asked: “What do we do when the ‘ideology’ of a program conflicts with the students’ actual needs? And how am I supposed to meet the needs of these students with no training and no support?” (pp. 7-8)

Ferris implied that the outdated “against policy” statement remains operative in writing centers. Writing centers do, in fact, offer sentence-level support for international and domestic students, and writing centers support students in this endeavor well. Furthermore, writing center research in the areas of international and domestic student-writers confirms that writing centers are, indeed, sites for providing specialized writing assistance. In the area of second-language research and writing centers, however, the international student-writer has remained at the center of the discussion and the bilingual Spanish-English-speaking student has received only peripheral attention.

Newman (2003) further described the dilemma: “the students fit neither the traditional ESL nor the non-traditional student definition, yet they pose specific challenges to writing center workers” (p. 44). In other words, the writing of bilingual Spanish-English speakers manifests distinct features, yet writing centers are generally not equipped to meet the growing demand for support.

For nearly four decades, writing research has urged college instructors to place less emphasis on “directive feedback strategies” in favor of global concerns (Ferris et al., 2011, p. 224). Unfortunately, however, the reduction of such strategies does not eliminate sentence-level needs or the penalties resulting from those unaddressed needs; additionally, the kinds of individualized, in-context directive feedback strategies that contribute to overall writerly

development are at odds with the timeline and enrollment capacity of the first-year writing course and the work load of the instructor. With targeted research and tutor training, however, writing centers are positioned to efficiently and effectively serve this population of student-writers and their instructors: as units that specialize in the delivery of feedback strategies in one-to-one sessions and over time, writing centers naturally and potentially calculatedly complement the effectiveness of writing classes.

This article describes why first-year writing programs and writing centers should work in tandem to explore the alignment of writing pedagogy and policy with language research and actual bilingual Spanish-English speakers' writing needs. More specifically, this article urges writing instructors to imagine how a campus writing center can serve as an extension to their work.

### **Changing Our Aim: Metalinguistic Awareness**

Engendered by urgent needs on our own campus, our Writing Center's research project began as a result of frustrations expressed by first-year writing instructors and their hope for assistance. We conducted over 1,400 one-on-one tutorials in an IRB approved context with our bilingual Spanish-English speakers, examining their essays and discovering that they have global and local-level writing error patterns consistent with research findings regarding English Language Learners (Cronnell, 1985; Holling, 2004; Riches and Genessee, 2006), Bilingual Education (Helman, 2004; Mora, 2008; Zutell and Allen, 1988), and Linguistics (Coe, 2001; Goldstein, 2001; Whitley, 2002).

As a result of our findings, we developed and implemented teaching strategies for use in individual tutoring sessions as well as in the classroom environment in the form of supplemental instruction workshops. Our discovery of *metalinguistic awareness* proved to be instrumental in our development of instructional strategies and resulted in a paradigm shift, not only in our research processes but also in the daily culture and language of our unit. Metalinguistic awareness is a conscious effort to understand the patterns, or forms and functions, of language (Mora, 2011) and is developed through explicit grammar instruction. It must be noted that the authors acknowledge the validity of the debate over grammar instruction (Braddock, 1963; Ellis, 2006; Krashen, 1993; Long, 1983; Norris & Ortega, 2000; VanPatten & Oikennon, 1996; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). The more recent research provides evidence in support of grammar instruction but claims that "grammar teaching needs to be reconceptualized . . . to include the kind of extensive treatment of grammar that arises naturally through corrective feedback" (Ellis, 2006, p. 95). In the context of writing center tutorials, explicit and extensive grammar instruction is both theoretically and pedagogically sound; tutorial instruction is meaningfully, purposefully, and urgently situated within writers' own language, and the correction of errors and the acquisition of rules coincides with students' naturalistic interlanguage development.

According to Mora (2008), bilingual students' access to metalinguistic awareness is crucial because their ability to explicitly compare and contrast two languages results in "increased self-regulatory control and enhanced language use and performance in a variety of increasingly cognitively-demanding literacy tasks" (para. 4). Riches and Genessee (2006) confirmed that bilingual Spanish-English speakers' ability to draw on similarities and differences between their two languages increases their success in reading and writing. Bilingual students possess implicit knowledge of language patterns that they intuitively apply to their learning; however, Mora (2011) identified that, in order for them to come to an explicit metalinguistic

awareness, they must be directly taught and provided with “structured learning experiences and purposeful uses of text” (para. 4), which is a role that writing centers are well positioned to adopt.

Without having to possess fluency, writing centers can learn about the syntactic and phonetic rules of a particular language by studying the work of linguists. A basic foundation has enabled our staff to recognize opportunities for instruction. Students have demonstrated both enthusiasm and relief when informed how their Spanish is a valuable resource for improving their written English. In an unsolicited scholarship essay that was reviewed by our staff, a bilingual Spanish-English speaker expresses both her frustration as a result of remedial placement and her response in the form of positive language transfer:

A recent academic challenge [sic] I faced was having trouble in my English writing. I was constantly put in lower class levels because of it. I felt that I did understand the material, but the fact that I was not able to write perfectly frustrated me because my advisors would put me in lower level classes. It was hard to progress in classes like this [sic] because I knew exactly what was being taught [sic] in certain subjects, but I still had to stay there because of my writing skills. Instead of taking a step forward I felt that I was taking two steps back in my education. I overcame this [sic] challenges by taking Spanish courses which helped me to read and write better in English. Amazingly, it really help [sic] me. I remember my Spanish teacher in high school telling us, “If you want to succeed in another language, you first have to know your own.” Once that semester was over, I completely agreed with him. I am fluent in Spanish, but learning Spanish grammar has helped me in my English writing. I am currently taking Spanish courses and the more I learn how to read and write in Spanish, the better I can read and write in English.

Oftentimes, an introduction to metalinguistic awareness changes students’ confidence and self-efficacy levels, as many have been conditioned to believe that their knowledge of Spanish is detrimental to their literacy development in English. We have witnessed increased self-correction of the most common and stigmatizing error patterns after the implementation of our teaching strategies. Writing instructors express relief when they familiarize themselves with our services, and it has become customary for them to recommend and require students to visit us for instruction. More importantly, however, a metalinguistic awareness of similarities and differences between Spanish and English transforms bilingual Spanish-English speakers’ beliefs about bilingualism and about their abilities to succeed as writers and readers, both in college and beyond.

We made it a priority to develop a training module for staff, hire and train Spanish-speaking tutors, market the uniqueness of our services to writing instructors and their students, and educate instructors about the unique writing challenges of their bilingual Spanish-English speakers. Finally, we devised a brief guide for tailoring services in writing centers that are experiencing similar trends and are recognizing the role they can play in supporting both the students and first-year writing programs (see Appendix). More importantly, for the composition instructor whose campus writing center does not yet recognize the need for program adaptation, the guide may serve as a non-threatening icebreaker, alleviating some of the apprehension that accompanies the identification of service gaps.

### Target One: Phonetic & Syntactic Error Patterns

Readers may initially question or resist a primary focus on sentence-level error patterns for students of higher education; however, many readers may be unfamiliar with the more advanced bilingual student whose persistent error patterns have eluded our education system and who is confronted with the reality of severe professional penalties. For example, a bilingual senior student came to our Writing Center after having failed her required teachers' licensing exam for the fourth time. A review of her score showed that she had repeatedly exceeded the requirements in both reading and math but had failed the writing section, almost exclusively due to one of the six scoring categories: Structure and Conventions. Despite having performed well in areas identified as Rhetorical Force, Organization, Support and Development, Usage, and Appropriateness, this student received 26 out of 80 on her overall written score due to a handful of persistent sentence-level errors. Over the course of the year, our Writing Center staff worked with her on the identification and self-correction of her error patterns—many of which follow in this section—resulting her passing the examination on her fifth attempt and pursuing her career as an ESOL bilingual teacher. Ironically, professional penalties are prohibiting individuals who are capable of being among our strongest teachers—our bilingual Spanish-English speakers—from entering the classroom as instructors based on their grammatical errors.

This serves as a reminder of the gravity of these errors, which might otherwise be perceived as insignificant by some who have historically valued concerns of content and rhetorical development as being more substantial and who fail to acknowledge the possibility that sentence level errors can, in fact, be global issues. This section provides both evidence of the unique patterns that exist and a practical demystification of the error patterns that are often misunderstood by writing evaluators; more importantly, however, this section demonstrates the potential engendered by securing a full-time writing center specialist position designed for the investment of hundreds of hours of textual examination, patterns recognition, language research, and Spanish-English interactions with student-writers.

#### Error Category #1: Spanish Syntax Transfer

A common source of written errors of bilingual Spanish-English speakers is the negative transfer of Spanish syntax into English. Our Writing Center identified the top error patterns within the Spanish-syntax transfer category: subject deletion, double negatives, and phrasal possessives.

**Subject deletion.** While bilingual Spanish-English speakers will often provide the head subject, they tend to drop or delete the pronoun subjects of dependent or subordinate clauses, as in “The teachers fear that \_\_\_\_ will lose their jobs.” In Spanish, “*Los profesores temen que perderán sus puestos de trabajo*” would be correct, with the subject embedded in the verb. Unlike English, pronoun subjects in Spanish are not required elements, making subject deletion common in bilingual students' writing.

**Double negatives.** Bilingual Spanish-English speakers commonly write sentences with double and triple negatives which is normal in Spanish but is non-standard in English. While “*El maestro no dijo nada a nadie cuando los estudiantes llegaron tarde a la clase*” contains the multiple required negative elements in Spanish, bilingual Spanish-English speakers often directly translate this into written English: “The teachers didn't say nothing to no one when the students arrived late to class.”

**Phrasal possessives.** Bilingual Spanish-English speakers often avoid using the possessive *s* altogether when intuitively transferring their knowledge of Spanish syntax to English. For example, the Spanish phrase “*El ensayo del hombre*” directly translates to “The essay of the man.” It is important to note that although phrasal possessives are grammatically correct in English and are, in fact, markers of advanced stylistic complexity in many cases, bilingual Spanish-English speakers’ usage is frequently stylistically awkward, and readers should be aware that it may indicate a bilingual student’s inability to use the possessive form.

### Category #2: Oral Spanish Transfer

The relationship between phonetic pronunciation and letter representation is a complex system, especially when comparing two different languages’ representations of their individual sounds in writing. Despite the Spanish and English alphabets sharing similar letter systems, the two languages do not consistently use the same letters to represent identical sounds. Spanish uses five vowel sounds, each represented by one letter. English, on the other hand, uses fifteen vowel sounds that are represented by a variety of spellings. One of the most prominent error patterns of bilingual Spanish-English speakers is Oral Spanish Transfer, which is the incorrect application of Spanish letter-sound rules to written English.

**Phonetic vowel transfer: /i/.** Bilingual Spanish-English speakers often incorrectly write the vowel letter *i* to represent the English phoneme /i/, as in “This [these] students have excellent ideas.” In Spanish, the letter *i* always represents /i/ (e.g., *mi*, *imposibilidad*, *igual*), while English’s letter *i* represents various sounds (e.g., sit, light, ski), is often combined with other vowel letters to represent additional sounds (e.g., main, friend, toil), and the English phoneme /i/ is represented by such spellings as *amoeba*, *people*, *tree*, *he*, *heat*, *conceit*, *priest*, *very*, *key*, *ski*, *magazine*. In the case of *this* vs. *these* (see above), readers often assume the error results from an incorrect pluralization of *student* to *students*; however, a basic metalinguistic awareness of Spanish and English phonetics provides an ability to recognize that the error originates from Oral Spanish Transfer.

**Phonetic consonant transfer: /t/ and /θ/.** Bilingual Spanish-English speakers often incorrectly exchange the consonant letter *t* and the consonant cluster *th*, as illustrated by the following: “Our teacher thought [taught] the class how to research.” Bilingual students have difficulty differentiating the English phonemes /t/, as in taught, and /θ/, as in thought, because neither sound correlates precisely to Spanish’s nearest equivalent. The Spanish /t/ sound is articulated in the mouth between where English’s /t/ and /θ/ sounds are formed, leading bilingual students to have difficulties differentiating when to write the letters *t* or *th* in English (e.g., tin for thin, ten for then, tank for thank). Additionally, students will demonstrate difficulty distinguishing other consonant sounds (e.g., den versus then, volt versus bolt, jay versus hay) because many of English’s consonant sounds either do not exist in Spanish or are represented by different letter spellings.

### Error Category #3: Oral English Transfer

The mismatch between our pedagogical assumptions as teachers and the actual learning needs of bilingual students is emphasized by research that describes bilingual Spanish-English speakers as *ear learners* and international students as *sight learners* (Holling, 2004; Reid, 2006). Ear learning describes the process of orally acquiring English through social immersion within the



language and culture of the US, while sight learning describes the process of acquiring English through the formal study of vocabulary and language rules in classrooms outside the US. Reid (2006) explained how bilingual Spanish-English students' writing features are different from the features of international peers: the features display "the conversational, phonetic qualities of 'ear-based' language learning, as well as their self-developed language 'rules' that may, upon examination, prove to be over-generalized or false" (p. 77). These faulty rules often result from inaccurately applying their knowledge of Spanish and oral English to written English. The writing of bilingual students is especially influenced by spoken dialect because "they are not print oriented . . . [and] their intuitive grasp of English syntax is largely oral" (qtd. in Holling, (2004), p. 30). Not surprisingly, our Writing Center has discovered that this phenomenon is one of the causes for bilingual students' writing errors, and we have categorized it as Oral English Transfer, which includes the following: possessive and plural *-s*, *-ed* endings, and dialectic homophones.

**Possessive and plural *-s*.** Bilingual Spanish-English students often incorrectly use possessive *-s*, which results from oral English being transferred into writing: "Teachers educational goals are mostly on the subjects content." Because English does not phonetically differentiate between its possessive, plural, and plural possessive forms, the language does not enable ear learners to distinguish between them in their writing. Readers will see this manifested in a misplaced or absent apostrophe.

**Dialectic homophones.** Another frequent pattern associated with Oral English Transfer includes dialectic homophones, which are words that sound similar to target words: "Ones [once] students enter college, they should make shore [sure] they work tours [towards] a career." Though many domestic students struggle with homophones, bilingual Spanish-English-speaking students will often use words that are not standard homophones but may, in fact, sound identical or very similar in their home dialect.

**Verbs and Adjectives Ending in *-ed*.** The absence of *-ed* endings in adjectives and verb forms, such as the perfect, passive, and simple past, is also a common error pattern: "The concern man has fix the errors on his paper." When readers encounter the absence of *-ed* markers, it is because the students cannot always hear the *-ed* sound pronounced in speech and have not yet mastered the rules for *-ed* endings. (See Appendix for Local-Level Sample Lesson).

### Target Two: Reading Comprehension

Bilingual Spanish-English students also experience a global writing challenge common to most student-writers: reading incomprehension. However, unlike domestic and international students who often rely on contextualized meanings, dictionaries, and translation devices, bilingual students can utilize metalinguistic awareness to discover the texts' meanings. Because 90% of English vocabulary over two syllables long is based in Latin and 75-80% of the entire Spanish language has Latin roots (The University of Illinois, n.d.), bilingual Spanish-English students possess the ability to use their knowledge of Spanish vocabulary to understand the meaning of cognate vocabulary in English academic texts; in other words, they are pre-equipped with a mental lexicon of everyday Spanish words akin to words of academic English. Moreover, research shows that bilingual students who explicitly recognize and use their knowledge of Spanish-English cognates during reading are more successful readers than those who do not (Hancin-Bhatt & Nagy, 1994; Jimenez, García, & Pearson, 1996; Proctor & Mo, 2009; Riches & Genesee, 2006). By accessing their everyday, communicative Spanish lexicon, bilingual Spanish-

English speakers can define academic words that are not familiar to many monolingual domestic peers and teachers (Alvarado, 2009; Mora, 2011). Sample cognates that our bilingual students have found in academic texts include *obscurity-obscuridad*, *tranquil-tranquilo*, *requisite-requisito*, and *prudent-prudente*.

Thus, when instructors and writing centers explicitly train bilingual Spanish-English speakers to be metacognitively aware of their languages, the students are understandably astounded by their newfound ability to use Spanish cognates to recognize difficult English vocabulary. Students should know that false cognates, or Spanish-English words that look similar but have different meanings, do exist but are uncommon. When taught to carefully read the word, sentence, and its surrounding context, the student should be able to identify a false cognate or use a cognate to accurately define the meanings of advanced academic vocabulary. (See Appendix for Global-Level Sample Lesson).

### **Aimed to Expand: Poised for a Partnership**

The kinds of writing challenges discussed here only become accessible as instructional targets when writing program administrators (WPA) are prepared to take the necessary steps. Important tasks of writing program administrators (WPA) include monitoring campus and classroom demographics and recognizing writing needs associated with those demographics. Though familiar with the monolingual domestic and international student enrollments on their campuses, few WPAs are able to provide accurate enrollment percentages for their bilingual Spanish-English speakers, with the exception being WPAs at recognized Hispanic-Serving Institutions, which comprise almost 10% of colleges and universities in the US (Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, 2011). At institutions with Latino enrollments below 25%, WPAs often have a great deal to learn about the growing student population. They might discover that the campus writing center has demographic data already in use in program development; when this is not the case, however, both units can singly or collaboratively engage in the following:

1. Gather institutional demographic data from the last five years and examine statewide secondary graduation rates and college enrollment projections.
2. Seek out regular reports on college applicant demographic changes: what is the percentage increase from the previous year? how are students self identifying linguistically? If there is no application question soliciting language background information, contact the admissions director to request the question be added to the application.
3. Begin to solicit linguistic background information from students enrolled in first-year writing classes and/or clients in the writing center; design a questionnaire that asks students to provide data regarding language spoken in the home, language study in school, and degrees of proficiency in speaking, reading, and writing in languages other than English.
4. Review the program's mission statement, website, and promotional materials: begin an ongoing discussion with colleagues and staff, examining alignments and discrepancies between objectives and actual practices.

After becoming aware of a shift in Latino enrollment, WPAs need to recognize that different language learning backgrounds require different teaching strategies to address writing

challenges and to incorporate this recognition into professional development opportunities for instructors. The nature of bilingualism demands that bilingual Spanish-English speakers not be treated as ESL or mainstream writers; however, most monolingual instructors are given no alternative, and the omission guarantees feelings of frustration and helplessness for all involved (Guzman, 2009; Newman, 2003). Instructors who are introduced to the metalinguistic awareness regarding how Spanish affects the production of written English rarely misconstrue error patterns that appear in bilingual Spanish-English speakers' writing and are poised to make need-based curriculum revisions. Ferris et al. (2011) recommended that instructors attend professional development opportunities in preparing to assess student challenges and implement need-specific curriculum but admitted that "it may be unrealistic for many writing instructors to obtain additional formal training" (p. 225-226). In some cases, budget and time constraints create barriers to intensive study for curriculum revision and development, and class-specific Latino low-enrollments makes the implementation of such curriculum impractical. Ferris et al. (2011) suggested that writing instructors learn "how to evaluate resources outside of the classroom . . . to which they might send their students for extra assistance" (p. 226).

Many writing centers possess the rare combination of fixed budgets, professional staff who are language specialists, and long-term client relationships, which are often self-sponsored and last for months, if not years. In a writing center, the development of new need-based training modules is commonplace, and the immediate and repeated implementation of individualized strategies that extend beyond a one-term curriculum is the norm. By seeking assistance from the campus writing center, WPAs may find that training modules specific to writing pedagogy for bilingual Spanish-English speakers already exist. When not the case, however, both units can singly or collaboratively engage in module development. Ferris et al. (2011) stated "L2 writing specialists who have training in both language and composition pedagogy could be invaluable resources for such in-service preparation activities" (p. 226). (See Appendix for a brief guide for writing centers).

### **Adjusting Our Sights: Directions for the Future**

The proclivity in academia to examine problems in an exhaustive manner without developing solutions is detrimental to our students, our academic support units, our universities, and the language education profession itself, "a profession that is in need of serious overhaul" (García, 2009, p. 325). A lack of solutions is reflected in low retention rates, waning budgets, and ineffective assessment measures. Solutions, however, change everything.

Our future is full of solutions. This research project is a beginning and an invitation for writing instructors and writing centers—along with other voices from across the disciplines, borders, and oceans—to enter into a progressive dialogue that will ultimately result in the alignment of writing pedagogy and policy with language research and actual student need. What might begin as a simple conversation illuminating shared frustrations must intentionally progress to an honest exploration of innovative solutions.

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## Appendix

**A Brief Guide for Writing Centers**

Writing center directors can provide tutors with the theory and tools necessary to support their daily work with bilingual Spanish-English speakers. Because most bilingual Spanish-English speakers have been taught, either directly or indirectly, through English-only programs that Spanish language hinders English learning, they are understandably thrilled when convinced otherwise by a writing center tutor. However, successful persuasion requires that tutors themselves possess metalinguistic awareness and the motivation to see the value in spending session time on teaching as opposed to fixing.

Guzman (2009) states that the writing challenges of bilingual Spanish-English speakers are “still unaccounted for in [writing center] training publications” (p. 22); the conspicuous gap in the existing discourse may leave writing center directors reluctant to begin the process of discovering how to best serve this population. However, developing a bilingual Spanish-English speakers module for tutor training is similar to developing any other module (e.g., WAC/WID, international student-writers, deaf student-writers, online sessions): introduce theory, transition to practice, and offer solutions—or, in the case of bilingual Spanish-English speakers, collaboratively imagine solutions and research avenues.

The following list of action items is designed to assist with the development of a bilingual Spanish-English speakers module:

1. Offer tutors reading material which illustrates how different language learning backgrounds require different teaching strategies to address writing challenges. Valdés (2006) serves as an outstanding introductory theoretical text for tutors and could be complemented by additional sources (e.g., Blanton, 1999; Coe, 2001; Harklau et al., 1999; Helman, 2004; Reid, 2006; Thonus, 2003).
2. Provide opportunities to describe and discuss language features by reading writing samples written by bilingual Spanish-English speakers. Because of the phonetic, syntactic, and lexical relationship between Spanish and English, workshopping will inevitably draw attention to global content challenges and local sentence-level error patterns.
3. Spend time learning about the interaction between Spanish and English languages, which includes negative and positive transfer issues, both oral and written; seek out expert advice from linguists, ESL instructors, and Spanish and bilingual educators on your campus, who may surprise you with the wealth of knowledge they are prepared to share.
4. Collaboratively imagine tutoring solutions to the predictable local sentence-level error patterns and global content challenges. Because little exists on the subject of tutoring bilingual Spanish-English speakers, directors will find the challenge of developing these strategies daunting without including voices from tutors, members of the bilingual Spanish-English-speaking population, and instructors in the fields of Linguistics, ESL, Spanish, and Bilingual Education. Inviting a variety of knowledge bases to join in a concerted effort will not only relieve the anxiety directors may feel, but will also establish a foundation of multilateral support that will facilitate the transfer of lessons from the training classroom to the tutoring session.

Writing center directors can guide tutors in their transition from training to tutoring by developing practical lessons that are easily replicated. As illustration, two sample lessons follow, which consist of step-by-step directions for implementation in one-on-one tutoring sessions. The

first example is designed to promote the confidence and self-efficacy levels of bilingual Spanish-English speakers in the area of biliteracy, while the second example is designed to demystify a common and stigmatizing convention-related writing challenge that is particular to bilingual Spanish-English speakers. Directors and staff could easily follow similar patterns in developing additional lessons.

### **Global-Level Sample Lesson: Reading Comprehension and Cognates**

A common global content issue experienced by many student-writers is reading incomprehension, which is manifested in off-the-mark summaries and misinterpretations of course-assigned texts. Bilingual Spanish-English speakers, however, possess a unique solution to this problem: their access to cognates. Sample cognates include edifice-*edificio*, castigate-*castigar*, odious-*odioso*, and mandate-*mandar*.

The following serves as a guide for introducing bilingual Spanish-English speakers to their ability to use Spanish to understand academic English. After a fifteen-minute lesson, students are often able to open an upper-division academic textbook, identify Spanish cognates of Latin-root vocabulary, and begin defining words that were previously inaccessible to them.

1. A student's paper cues you to suspect that she does not understand the course text: she makes false claims and/or consistently provides incompatible evidence from the text. Because you had familiarized yourself with her client information before the session began, you can ask whether she has ever tried using Spanish to help her understand academic texts before.
2. Ask the student for her course text, make a photocopy of one page from the section where she is having comprehension difficulties, and give her a highlighter.
3. Direct her to silently read through the section and highlight any words that look similar to the words she knows in Spanish. When she is done marking, ask her to identify the most difficult portion of the sample text.
4. Ask the student to look at the highlighted words in the most difficult section. For each word, have the student provide the Spanish word that appears to be most similar.
5. End the lesson by telling her that academic words in English generally share similar meanings with their Spanish counterparts, but to always confirm contextual meaning, as false cognates do exist.

### **Local-Level Sample Lesson: Perfect Tense -ed Endings**

The following serves as a guide for introducing bilingual Spanish-English speakers to how their knowledge of Spanish can assist them in self-correcting the absent -ed endings when using perfect tense:

1. You notice a student is consistently omitting the -ed endings on verbs in the perfect form: *I have walk\_\_ to school many times.*
2. Explain to him that -ed endings in speech are difficult to discern; they are unstressed syllables that often blend phonetically with the word that follows, especially in *verb + to* constructions (e.g., *talked to*).
3. Ask the student to write the direct translation of the sentence in Spanish: *He caminado muchas veces.* While you may not know Spanish, you can understand the basic structure of the sentence because you know its English equivalent: *I have walked to school many times.* In the case of perfect forms, English and Spanish are syntactically identical and will consist of three elements in this order:



<b>English perfect form</b>	1. to have	2. verb	3. <i>-ed</i> ending
<b>Spanish perfect form</b>	1. haber	2. verb	3. <i>-ado/-ido</i> ending

<b>English Example</b>	<u>I have</u> <b>walked</b> to school many times.
<b>Spanish Translation</b>	<u>He</u> <i><b>caminado</b></i> a la escuela muchas veces.

4. Explain that Spanish perfect tense is identical to English and can be directly translated as follows: *He caminado muchas veces. = I have walked to school many times.*
5. Focus specifically on the *-ed* ending by telling your student that an *-ed* ending in English equals the *-ado* or *-ido* ending in Spanish that he just translated for you. Have the student correct the sentence.
6. Once he has a complete draft of his paper, direct him to search sentences for any forms of *to have + verb* and translate the entire sentence into Spanish. When the translation includes an *-ado/-ido* ending, he needs to add an *-ed* ending to his verb.

**Hiring Bilingual Spanish-English Speakers**

Writing center directors should recruit bilingual writing consultants and encourage them to tutor in Spanish and English. According to Brisk and Harrington (2000), bilingual students’ literacy skills in a second language flourish “in environments where the use of the native language is supported,” which means that the use of Spanish in sessions enables students to more easily discuss writing concepts and ideas (pp. 6-7). When combined with the fact that bilingual tutors connect with their bilingual peers on a personal level through shared culture, these sessions create an environment where linguistic and cultural diversity takes its rightful place: as an asset rather than a detriment.

While monolingual consultants are able to learn the root causes of error patterns and effectively use this knowledge in sessions, their ability is often limited to those patterns identified within the tutor-training course. Bilingual consultants, on the other hand, possess knowledge of Spanish that gives them greater metalinguistic awareness to explore new ways to teach with Spanish during tutorials.

Unfortunately, however, many bilingual tutors must first be convinced that using Spanish in tutoring sessions will be beneficial. Having been schooled under the NCLB Act, they may initially hesitate to use their Spanish in academic settings because Spanish has often been devalued and positioned as an obstacle to English fluency. Bilingual consultants will begin to gain confidence in using their Spanish when directors designate training time to consider the benefits of bilingual tutoring; once they experience its pedagogical effectiveness in one-on-one sessions with their bilingual peers, bilingual tutors will transform into advocates of bilingual tutoring.

The following list of action items is designed to guide in the recruitment of bilingual writing consultants:

**Recruiting Inside the Writing Center**

1. Train tutors to offer employment applications to outstanding bilingual Spanish-English-speaking writers with whom they work and to identify potential tutors from graduate student thesis-writing support groups.

2. Utilize activities and university obligations in which you are already involved to find tutors. For example, you may identify potential candidates while scoring essays for scholarships (e.g., Financial Aid, TRiO, and Study Abroad) and writing contests (e.g., MLK essays and memorial scholarships).

### **Recruit Outside the Writing Center**

Establish a key point person in your unit who will systematically engage in the following:

1. Develop relationships with established student- and academic-affairs staff who have access to, and are recognized by, bilingual Spanish-English speakers (e.g., Multicultural Student Services, Bilingual Education Program, and TRiO).
2. Attend social events (e.g., *La Fiesta Latina*, Diversity Scholars Award Dinners, and César Chavez Conference) to establish relationships with students.
3. Frequent student clubs (e.g., Multicultural Student Union, MEChA, and Latino student clubs) to socially integrate, offer writing center presentations, and solicit tutor applications.
4. Visit classes that bilingual Spanish-English speakers attend, offer writing center presentations, and solicit tutor applications. Also, request permission from instructors and students to copy and read class essays to identify potential candidates for employment.
5. Determine the most popular majors of bilingual Spanish-English speakers and contact professors seeking recommendations for potential tutors. Many writing centers, however, will have to be creative in identifying this student population because universities tend to have few, or no, data-capturing categories that focus on linguistic diversity.

**WORD COUNT: 7538**