



Searching for differences and discovering similarities: Why international and resident second-language learners' grammatical errors cannot serve as a proxy for placement into writing courses



Kristen di Gennaro

Pace University, English Department, 41 Park Row, New York, NY 10038, USA

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has drawn attention to differences in the writing produced by international second-language writers and U.S. resident second-language writers, with implications for placement into college writing courses. Initially designed to complement the literature through the discovery of different types of grammatical errors in the writing produced by these two groups of learners, the current study instead challenges previous research by noting how similar the two groups' grammatical errors are when examined in detail. Findings suggest that when groups are controlled for writing proficiency and first language, noticeable differences across the groups diminish. The study's findings call into question placement decisions for resident second-language writers, as well as the value of relying on differences in grammatical errors to distinguish the two groups. Findings can assist writing program administrators, placement test administrators, and writing instructors who need to accommodate both international and resident second-language learners.

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1. Introduction

In the past several years, numerous books, articles, and conference presentations have shed light on the heterogeneity of second language (L2) learners in postsecondary education in the US, drawing particular attention to differences between international L2 learners and long-term resident L2 learners, also referred to in the literature as Generation 1.5 (cf. di Gennaro, 2012; Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999; Reid, 2006; Roberge, Siegal, & Harklau, 2009). Initial claims, based primarily on anecdotal accounts, have been followed by empirical studies, some supporting and others disputing original assertions of differences across the two groups of learners in terms of their writing ability (di Gennaro, 2009, 2013; Doolan, 2013, 2014; Doolan & Miller, 2012; Levi, 2004). While such discussions may seem esoteric outside the L2 writing community, findings from this body of research have direct implications for how students' writing is assessed for placement into college writing programs and, in turn, affect the type of support and services students are offered during their college careers. Consequently, findings also have implications for student retention and completion rates, especially for programs serving diverse students (Fox, 2005).

Many postsecondary programs with large L2 populations offer credit-bearing composition courses for L2 writers, parallel to those required of all undergraduate students. Such courses are intended to benefit international L2 students, assisting

E-mail addresses: kdigennaro@pace.edu, kdigennaro@gmail.com

students in their adjustment to the writing norms, preferences, and expectations of their new discourse communities. Resident L2 students could potentially benefit from such instruction as well, but this requires both identification and acceptance of their status as L2 learners. Since many resident L2 students do not self-identify as L2 learners, they are often placed into courses designed for monolingual English students, taught by instructors unfamiliar with L2 writing pedagogy. Aimed at better identifying, and thus serving, resident L2 students, several researchers have sought to detect characteristics in students' writing that not only identify students as candidates for L2 writing courses, but that can distinguish resident L2 from international L2 students (cf. di Gennaro, 2009, 2013; Levi, 2004). Identification of differences between international and resident L2 students' writing would support claims that the two groups of students have different writing strengths and weaknesses, and could lead to the development of writing courses designed for different types of L2 learners.

Studies seeking empirical evidence of differences in students' writing have tended to focus on grammatical forms, or more specifically, on the presence of grammatically inaccurate forms, and compared error counts in various grammatical categories across the two groups. For example, Frodesen and Starna's (1999) case study compared grammatical errors in the writing of a long-term resident L2 learner with those made by a learner educated primarily in his home country. Findings revealed the long-term resident's writing included a wide variety of errors, such as errors in word forms, verb forms, subject-verb agreement, articles, word choice, noun plurals, and sentence structure; the international learner's writing included few, yet systematic errors, such as incorrect verb tenses, word forms, and use of non-idiomatic expressions. In a much larger study, Levi (2004) analyzed writing by 140 learners divided into 3 groups, resident L2, international L2, and monolingual English basic writers, in search of statistically significant differences in their error patterns. Levi found the resident group more similar to the international group than to the basic writing group in terms of total error counts; however, when errors were divided into subcategories, significant differences between the two L2 groups emerged.

Focusing on past participle errors, Mikesell (2007) found that, while both groups produced the same percentage of errors, they differed in terms of error types. Specifically, after taking into account linguistic context, the international L2 learners' errors appeared to result from learners producing the correct form but using it in an inappropriate context, while the resident L2 learners' errors were related primarily to producing an incorrect form. Doolan and Miller (2012) examined error patterns across resident L2, international L2, and English L1 students, finding that the resident L2 group committed more than twice as many errors as the L1 group, with significantly more errors in verb forms, prepositional phrases, and word forms. Doolan (2013, 2014) continued this line of research but with somewhat contradictory results in that in the more recent studies, resident L2 students' errors appeared more similar to those of monolingual L1 students than to international L2 students. Doolan (2013, 2014) interprets these findings to indicate that resident L2 students should be treated as L1 students in terms of writing course placement.

Consistent across all the studies reviewed is the finding that resident L2 learners' writing is distinct from international L2 learners' writing, yet the researchers propose very different solutions for writing course placement decisions. Levi (2004) believes that resident L2 students are different enough from international L2 students to warrant the creation of new composition courses separating resident from international L2 writers. Similarly, Mikesell (2007) proposes that each group can benefit from different types of grammar instruction. Doolan (2013, 2014), however, concludes that his resident L2 group should not be treated as L2 learners, but grouped with monolingual English speakers instead. It should be noted that the reviewed studies were designed very differently. Levi's (Levi, 2004) L2 groups included all Spanish L1 speakers, limiting conclusions to Spanish-speaking learners. While controlling for L1 is a strength to the extent that L1 would not be confounded with grammatical error patterns, it limits generalizability for resident and international learners from other L1 backgrounds. Doolan's (Doolan, 2013, 2014) studies suffer from more substantial weaknesses, including the confounding of learner groups (some international L2 learners completed high school in the U.S., making them resident L2 learners by most researchers' definitions) and proficiency levels (there is no indication that participants had comparable levels of writing proficiency as they were recruited from various courses, programs, and schools). Perhaps most problematic is the uniqueness of Doolan's (Doolan, 2013) error taxonomy: errors in word form, word choice, and subject-verb agreement all appear in the same category labeled word errors; errors in prepositional phrases and articles are grouped together as word class errors. In addition to a lack of theoretical grounding, these error categorizations suggest limited attention to grammatical meanings in favor of grammatical forms (cf. Purpura, 2004), and threaten the validity of any statistically significant differences found.

While grammatical errors may be more salient than other features of writing ability, and grammatical accuracy is, arguably, the most objective aspect of a rather subjective construct, an exclusive focus on errors risks perpetuating a reductive view of writing ability. The risk is even greater when errors are further reduced to mere frequencies, and claims are made that groups can be distinguished by the type and number of infractions they have committed. This essentialization of writing ability into observable and measurable units at the expense of construct representation is incongruent with current models of writing ability (cf. Huot & O'Neill, 2009; Weigle, 2002). In fact, the use of automated essay scoring programs, which also reduce writing to observable and measurable units, has been met with widespread criticism and resistance by composition and writing assessment scholars precisely for this reason (cf. Condon, 2013). Claims based on research that focuses on error quantities alone should be examined with the same scrutiny and skepticism as results produced by automated essay scoring programs, especially given the potential of such claims to influence writing placement decisions for certain groups of learners.

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