# Evaluating ESL: Making sense of university professors' responses to second language writing

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## Abstract

This study addresses the response of social science and engineering science faculty to a naturally occurring sample of second language writing. Using a matched-guise protocol, faculty participants were led to believe that the one-page essay was produced by an international student whose first language was either Chinese or Spanish. The faculty evaluated the writing holistically (on a scale from 1 to 10) and were invited to "correct the five most troublesome errors." Results indicate that the ethnic guise did not affect holistic scores; however, the social science and engineering science faculty did rate the composition differently. While qualitative analysis demonstrates that, not surprisingly, individual editing styles among faculty are quite variable, there was a tendency across faculty to edit semantic gaps as opposed to grammatical items. This indicates a preference by the faculty to clarify content, a finding that supports prior research.
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## Introduction

Second language (L2) composition has gained significant autonomy, both as a research discipline and as an educational program (Zamel, 1995). The value of this focused attention is an ever-increasing understanding of the processes and products of L2 writing. At the same time, across university campuses, L2 writers strive to meet the everyday challenge of preparing texts for courses throughout the curriculum, and, by extension, facing the writing demands and preferences of the instructors of those courses. In studies of non-nativeness in L2 student writing, native/non-native identity has tended to be viewed only from the perspective of writers and texts

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with little or no consideration of audience, or in cases when audience response has been considered, limiting research to relationships between non-native instructors and native learners (cf., Aigner & Thum, 1986; Clayton, 2000; Norris, 1991). The current study, however, examines responses to non-nativeness on the part of one of the most important audiences L2 writers encounter during their educational experience: their professors. The study builds on prior work concerning reader response to L2 writing by examining several facets of the evaluation process in a university setting: the effect of writer identity, especially as related to potential ethnic biases; evaluator characteristics; and, finally, orientation by university professors to editing errors in L2 writing.

Many approaches within second language research have presented insights into the intricacies of native/non-native interactions; one of those has been broadly termed the study of "error gravity" (for reviews, see Eisenstein, 1983; Ludwig, 1982; Rifkin & Roberts, 1995). This type of research has aimed to establish hierarchies of error types so that language teachers might focus on areas of grammar and pronunciation judged by native speakers to be most disruptive to communication. Measures of comprehensibility, acceptability, and naturalness are among the constructs used to assess sensitivity to particular L2 errors.

Using an error evaluation approach, error gravity hierarchies have been investigated for second and foreign language classes in English (Johansson, 1978; Khalil, 1985; Sheorey, 1986; Santos, 1987; Tomiyana, 1980); French (Magnan, 1983; Piazza, 1980); German (Delisle, 1982; Politzer, 1978); and Spanish (Chastain, 1980; Guntermann, 1978; Gynan, 1985). In most of this research, isolated spoken or written sentences or contrived prose passages have been used as stimuli. Such studies have provided useful insights into native speaker perception of errors in L2 writing, but the approach, which often presents only one error per sentence carrier, may only partially capture a realistic evaluation of L2 performance. In order to help composition instructors better prepare their learners, we argue for the importance of assessing response to L2 error in a more naturalistic manner. Rather than asking native writers to evaluate L2 errors in terms of abstract concepts such as acceptability or comprehensibility, a naturalistic performance by the evaluator (i.e., marking and editing any error they perceive) holds the potential to produce a more realistic accounting of response to L2 writing. In the current study, we aim to more closely approximate actual evaluation of and response to L2 writing by asking university faculty to holistically grade and then edit an actual composition written by a student for whom English is not a native language.

Along with investigating the way errors are responded to by university professors, we also examine whether the identity of the language *producer* influences evaluation of the language sample. This purpose brings the current study into the domain of social psychological research regarding language and "interpersonal perception processes," or the ways in which individuals perceive and evaluate other individuals or groups (Bradac, 1990; Brown, Giles, & Thakerer, 1985). Much of this work, which spans several decades, has been carried out in studies of accentedness or dialect, which rely on spoken language data to elicit evaluations of non-standard speakers (for a review, see Bradac, Cargile, & Hallett, 2001). Nevertheless, it is not necessary to have speech cues to elicit attitudinal responses to individuals and groups. When asked to simply "think about" an ethnic or racial group (Callan & Gallois, 1983) or even look at pictures of ethnic group members (Fishman, Rattner, & Weiman, 1987) and then rate members of that group according to a list of personality attributes, subjects behave in a predictably negative or positive manner. Clearly, stereotypes exist, and they feed into attitudes and evaluations of groups and individuals.

Investigations of production in L2 writing, however, have only minimally probed whether or not pre-existing stereotypes contribute to the evaluation of errors made by non-native language