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journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jslw](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jslw)Teaching multilingual learners in Canadian writing-intensive classrooms: Pedagogy, binaries, and conflicting identities<sup>☆</sup>Steve Marshall<sup>a,\*</sup>, Jennifer Walsh Marr<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> Simon Fraser University, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby, BC, V5A 1S6, Canada<sup>b</sup> University of British Columbia, Vantage College, 6363 Agronomy Rd #2001, Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z4, Canada

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## ABSTRACT

In this article, we attempt to bring new analytic lenses (Canadian, European, from applied linguistics and sociolinguistics) to the fields of composition and second language writing in North America. Specifically, we focus on the challenges that linguistic diversity poses to instructors teaching Writing Intensive (WI) classes at West Coast University (WCU) in Vancouver, Canada. First, we highlight aspects of the rich and varied multi-/plurilingualism of students at the university. We then look at how writing to learn, a cornerstone of Writing Intensive Learning, can present particular challenges to multilingual students who write in English as an additional language and who may lack the necessary proficiency in academic literacy to learn through writing. We present excerpts from interviews with eight WI instructors from different disciplines at the university, in which they describe their understandings of multilingualism, pedagogical responses to linguistic diversity in their classes, and perceptions of their roles as WI instructors. In their responses, participants described a number of pedagogical dilemmas, conceptual binaries, and conflicting professional identities. In our conclusion, we highlight an institutional backdrop that challenges the professional identities of WI instructors, and close by considering the implications of our findings at institutional level and in the writing-intensive classroom.

## 1. Introduction

Numerous studies have addressed the challenges faced by students writing in English as an additional language (EAL) across the disciplines in North American higher education, primarily in the United States. Fewer studies have focused on Canada, and specifically on EAL students taking writing intensive courses that require them to *learn through writing*.

The site of our study is West Coast University (WCU) in Metro Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada.<sup>1</sup> The university has approximately 20% international students and an even larger number of multilingual domestic students. According to a recent undergraduate survey at the university, over 40% of respondents self-identified as speakers of English as an additional language (EAL). At WCU, all undergraduate students are required to take a minimum of two writing intensive (WI) courses during their studies to graduate, one lower division and one upper division. The focus of writing intensive pedagogy at the university is on both *learning to write* and *writing to learn*, which will be defined below. For the latter, students need the necessary academic literacy skills (notably, in reading and writing advanced texts) to engage meaningfully with course content through writing. In this sense, the presence of large

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<sup>1</sup> To preserve anonymity, we have used a pseudonym for the university and changed the names of individuals, courses, and faculties as necessary.

numbers of multilingual students who speak and write English as an additional language in WI classes can present challenges for students and instructors alike. Today, at WCU instructors find themselves negotiating the tensions between *learning to write* and *writing to learn* in linguistically-diverse classes, looking for teaching approaches to match the needs of the students enrolled in their classes as well as the courses' pedagogical aims.

In writing this article, we aim to bring some new analytic lenses (Canadian, European, from applied linguistics and socio-linguistics) to the fields of composition and second language writing in North America, which have traditionally been dominated by writing experts, many doing research in the United States. Our focus is on the dilemmas and challenges that WI course instructors face responding to linguistically-diverse classes made up large numbers of EAL students. Many of these students are international or domestic students, typically perceived as “linguistically underprepared” (Hirsch, 2014, p. 155), not the idealized native speakers (Leung, Harris, & Rampton, 1997) of English who may benefit most readily from *learning through writing* (Marshall, 2009). In this study, we refer to idealized learners with reference to students who have *English* as their first/and or dominant language and who may benefit most from learning through writing. However, we recognize that academic discourse, in this case academic English in different disciplinary contexts, is a new language for all students when they start post-secondary education regardless of their linguistic background (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1994). That said, the challenge is much greater for students whose first, second, or other language is not English, and who use languages other than English in most of their daily lives. In this respect, the cornerstone of WIL pedagogy – *learning through writing*, or *writing to learn* (see below) – often presents additional challenges to such students.

In our study, we carried out semi-structured interviews with eight faculty members teaching writing-intensive learning courses across the disciplines. Interviewees were asked about their knowledge of WCU's pre-WI foundational academic literacy course AL099, and gave their views on a broad range of issues related to the multilingual students taking their writing-intensive courses: [i] how instructors understood multilingualism as a concept (their own and their students'); [ii] how they responded pedagogically to the presence of large numbers of multilingual students in their classes; and [iii] how they perceived their role as a WI course instructor. These three questions became the focus of our study.

Instructors described numerous pedagogical dilemmas, conceptual binaries, and conflicting professional identities. We found that instructors tended to construct the multilingualism of their students around traditional binary paradigms (native speaker/ESL, first language/second language, domestic student/international student, fluent and competent speaker/one who is lacking). We argue that, as a result of increased social and linguistic diversity, such binaries are becoming ever-increasingly blurred and less relevant. We conclude by highlighting an institutional backdrop that challenges instructors' stable professional identities, before briefly considering the implications of our findings at institutional level and in the writing-intensive classroom.

## 2. WAC, WID, second language writing

Our analysis involves making connections between research and pedagogy in the fields of multi-/plurilingualism, and second language writing, composition studies, applied linguistics, rhetoric, and linguistics (Silva & Leki, 2004). Many studies have looked at curriculum, pedagogy, and ESL/L2 students in Writing in the Disciplines (WID) and Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) contexts in the United States. In Silva (1993), the author presents a comprehensive synthesis of research on L1 and L2 writing, focusing on the distinct nature of second language writing. With a similar focus, Cox (2014) highlights frameworks for comparing L1 and L2 writing: L2 writing from a difference-as-deficit stance, a difference-accommodated stance, and a difference-as-resource stance (Canagarajah, 2002). With regard to the dichotomy between WAC and WID, Carter, Ferzli, and Wiebe (2007) describe a WAC focus on writing to learn as opposed to a WID focus on learning to write. Cox further describes the need for alliances to be made between WAC program leaders and groups working with L2 learners. She highlights the challenge of persuading faculty members “not only to infuse their pedagogy with writing, an already challenging task in some cases, but also to create linguistically and culturally inclusive classrooms” (p. 301). Equally, the division of labor (Matsuda, 1999) between WAC and TESOL and the development of global curriculum through WAC-TESOL collaborations is analyzed in Siczek and Shapiro (2014).

Focusing on genre research with specific reference to Canada, Gentil (2011) highlights the potential of a biliteracy perspective as a way of understanding how multilingual writers develop their genre expertise in more than one language. A point of note regarding genre(s) is the fact that many students at WCU take lower division WI courses outside of the disciplines in which they will major, meaning that their engagement in the related discourse community can be short lived (Leki & Carson, 1994). With a specific focus on ESL writers' coping strategies across the disciplines, Leki (1995) examines the experiences of five ESL visa students in the “struggle to survive the demands of disciplinary courses” (p. 235). Evidently, linguistic diversity can serve both to enrich and complicate course design and is full of complexities (Habib & Zawacki, 2011; Leki, 1995). At WCU, an added challenge many students face is applying the generic knowledge they learn at foundational/EAP level to the specific contexts of disciplinary writing (Leki & Carson, 1997) in their first lower division WI course.

## 3. Multilingual students in an urban university

Two aspects of multilingualism in Metro Vancouver are of particular relevance to our study. According to national statistics available at the time of the study, just under half of the population spoke an immigrant language at home, for example, Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi, Tagalog, Korean, and Farsi (Statistics Canada, 2011). Of added interest, the diasporic concentration of speech communities in the city means that immigrant languages are also regularly used outside of the home. In many areas of the city, over 85% of inhabitants use a language other than English at home, as well as in their daily lives (Statistics Canada, 2011).

These characteristics of the city's multilingualism are evident in the linguistically-diverse classrooms at WCU. First, many classes

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