

Passages into College Writing: Listening to the Experiences of International Students



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Abstract: Enrollments of international students are at very high levels in the U.S., a development that has altered the demographics of first-year composition classes in recent years. Nonetheless, writing instructors and administrators often know little about these students' backgrounds, which can make it difficult to design pedagogies that are responsive to their specific needs. Drawing on data from a qualitative, longitudinal study with a cohort of undergraduate international students, this article addresses three interrelated issues: 1) pre-college writing experiences of international students in both their first languages and English; 2) key points of challenge and discovery for international students as they enter the culture of U.S. academic writing; and 3) possible pedagogic interventions designed to better support international students. Situating findings in relation to recent scholarship on students' transitions from high school to college, the article explores ways in which the experiences of international students are both similar to and different than those of their U.S.-educated peers.

Introduction

A few years ago, two colleagues and I who teach first-year composition (FYC) for international students organized an event for writing faculty at our institution. The goal was to provide guidance for instructors who do not have expertise in teaching international students, but who often have these students in their classes. We talked about teaching strategies, and then we invited three international students to talk about their experiences and answer questions. What ensued was inspiring: a room of faculty members sat enraptured as these students described their successes, challenges, and grievances as emerging international student writers at a U.S. university. Then, when it was time for questions, multiple hands went up. By the end of the event, all of us were wiser, and perhaps a little humbler, too.

I walked away with two key insights. First, I realized that I rarely take the time to listen to my students. That is, I am attentive to them during class discussions and office conferences, when we usually talk about their papers. However, I rarely offer discursive spaces in which they might reflect on their broader experiences as students, writers, and young adults who are working to succeed in the sometimes-opaque environment of the university. Second, I learned that international students enter my composition classes with little or no experience in the academic genres that I teach. Most pointedly, I learned that nearly all of these students arrive at college with no knowledge of research writing in English or any other language.

As an instructor, these insights altered my approach to FYC with international students, in that I now carefully scaffold the entrée into research writing, starting with introductory discussions about research as a discourse. As a scholar, the experience inspired an interest in international students' encounters with writing and rhetoric before they arrive in the U.S., and their evolving relationships with writing as they move through college—or their *passages*, as I will call them in this article. In response, I began a four-year research project that employs a qualitative case study approach with a small cohort of international undergraduate students (nine). Through this work, I have created a dedicated framework through which to listen to and learn from students. As I will argue, it is only through this kind of attentive listening that writing professionals can appreciate the ways in which students understand and articulate their own college passages—and, in turn, recognize opportunities for pedagogic interventions. The present article reports on selected findings from data collected during the first year of the study. By analyzing the perspectives of international students, I aim to honor their unique experiences, and, moreover, to treat them as a legitimate source of knowledge that can guide pedagogic decision-making. More specifically, I address three interrelated questions about

student transitions or passages: 1) What are the writing backgrounds of international students? 2) What are some key experiences of challenge and discovery for these students as they transition into U.S. college writing? 3) How might answers to these questions suggest pedagogic interventions?

All of these questions refract a larger question that has become increasingly important to composition scholars in recent years: How do we understand and support students' transitions out of the rhetorical and educational regimes that they encounter before college and into the world of higher education? Researchers have presented a range of insights on this topic. For example, multiple studies reveal a disjuncture between the kinds of writing instruction that students encounter in high school and the expectations of FYC classes (Acker and Halasek; Addison and James McGee; Applebee and Langer; Denecker; Fanetti et al.; Patterson and Duer). Others, situated within the heuristics of transfer, explore how high school writing experiences can shape the composing practices of college students in diverse ways (DasBender; Reiff and Bawarshi; Robertson et al.; Yancey et al.). Still others highlight the unique challenges faced by U.S.-educated multilingual writers as they attempt to move through the high school curriculum and into higher education (Kanno and Harklau; Kanno and Kangas; Lay et al.; Ortmeier-Hooper and Ruecker; Ruecker, *Transiciones*).

Within this rich and expanding literature, international students have received limited explicit attention (notable exceptions include DasBender; DePalma and Ringer; James). However, given the high enrollments of international students in FYC today, it is essential that faculty and administrators consider their unique situations, which, as I will emphasize, are both similar to and different than those of students who have completed their secondary schooling in the U.S.^{1} By engaging qualitatively with international students' individual passages into higher education, I aim to integrate their experiences into the broader conversations on transition and transfer in FYC, while also suggesting classroom practices that can provide needed support for this specific population.

Categorizing and Placing International Students

The arrival of more international students has altered demographics at institutions both large and small. The university at which I teach—a medium-sized, private university in a major urban area—is no exception, and the changing demographics have had multiple implications for FYC. Some of our primary areas of focus are reflected in the literature: administrators and instructors have worked to determine the best placements for international and multilingual students (Jordan; Ruecker, “Improving”; Saenkhum); more attention has been given to prospective teachers' experiences and training around intercultural awareness and multilingual writing (Ferris; Ferris, Jensen, and Wald; Ferris et al.; Matsuda et al.; Miller-Cochran; Ruecker, *Transiciones*; Schneider); other college units, and particularly the writing center, have worked to develop new initiatives for supporting these students (Bruce and Rafoth; Rafoth).

A critical concern that threads through all of this work is the difficulty in categorizing international students. Most international students are English language learners, so they are frequently classified as “multilingual,” “ESL,” “EAL,” or “L2.”^{2} Some of our institutional developments have adhered to this categorization. For example, we now have studio sections of FYC for multilingual writers, including resident immigrant students and international students. However, classifying international students simply according to linguistic status is problematic. As scholars in writing studies and applied linguistics have described, multilingual students can have dramatically different educational backgrounds and linguistic needs, and it can be detrimental to group them monolithically (Cox; Freidrich; Ferris and Hedgcock; Lawrick; Ortmeier-Hooper).^{3} As a further complication, not all international students are actually English language learners, as substantial populations of international students have completed secondary education in English.^{4}

These and other factors make it difficult to calibrate broad interventions. Furthermore, efforts to address international students' needs have to be considered in relation to the needs of U.S.-educated students, whose pre-college experiences are already diverse. From one perspective, all college students find themselves in the same situation: they are being asked to perform academic tasks that likely differ from than what they encountered in the past. In the case of U.S.-educated students, scholars have highlighted several specific differences, including the increased amount of writing students are expected to complete in college (Applebee and Langer); the move from reading and analyzing literary texts in high school to non-fiction texts in college (Applebee and Langer; Yancey et al.); the kinds of issues instructors typically address in responses to student writing (Acker and Halasek); the new expectation that college students will be autonomous learners (Fanetti et al.); and the move from “surface writing” to “deep writing” (Denecker). In their study of writing transfer from high school to college, Reiff and Bawarshi observe that students who have the most long-term success as college writers may not necessarily be those who have the most pre-college experience with academic genres, but rather those who are willing to “to shift away from the writing experiences with which they felt comfortable, confident, and successful” and see themselves as “novices” (330).

The above observations apply to nearly all incoming college students; however, for international students, the passage into the rhetorical reality of a U.S. university can be uniquely challenging because it is embedded in a new cultural and ideological reality—and all of this is encoded in English. Drawing on her qualitative research with international students, Palmer describes a process of “triple learning,” which demands that students engage in an ongoing negotiation across the linguistic and cultural realms of home, the local community of the new country, and the academic community of the university. The pressures of such a process—of such a passage—can be unique, and it is important for FYC instructors and administrators to see it as such. A necessary first step is learning about the writing backgrounds of these students.

In an early case study on the topic, Spack followed a Japanese student, Yuko, for three years. Among other observations, she notes that as a high school student, Yuko’s writing practice in Japanese was limited, as “she did virtually no writing in courses other than literature” (8). In those classes, “she wrote papers of less than one page that were ‘basically reaction papers’ with ‘no forms, no styles to follow.’” (8). Furthermore, in the case of English writing, Yuko’s pre-college experiences consisted of assignments for which she composed “one or two sentences that focused on a specific grammar concept” (8). Ferris echoes Spack’s points, noting that “...if they [international students] have had previous classroom instruction in English in the home countries, it most typically emphasized grammar and vocabulary rather than extended composition. In many contexts, there was also relatively little writing instruction even in the L1” (40; see also Ferris and Hedgcock 32). In a more recent case study of a Chinese international student, DasBender arrives at a similar finding, observing that the student had no “academic formal writing” before arriving to study in the U.S. (283).

Others, however, paint a different picture. Freidrich describes international students as “[p]robably well trained in L1 writing strategies transferable to [the] L2” (18). Leki has also emphasized that international students arrive at U.S. colleges with rich rhetorical repertoires and writing strategies. Lawrick conducted a survey among 161 international undergraduate students at a large public university. Among the findings were the following points: 71% of respondents claimed that they had learned composition in an educational institution in the home country (38); nearly all students (88%) had received “explicit instruction in English composition” in the home country (39); students indicated that the two most common sites where they had learned how to write were in the K-12 system and/or in college entrance examination preparation classes (40). As a result of these findings, Lawrick is critical of observations by Ferris and others, who she claims take a “monolingualist” and “monorhetorical” view of international students by treating them as a *tabula rasa* (49). In particular, she argues that the writing backgrounds of international students are changing rapidly today, as educational systems around the world are influenced by globalizing English and “a worldwide increase in offering instruction in English composition” (31).

The findings I will report here overlap with all of the above perspectives in various ways, which in itself speaks to the diversity of pre-college writing experiences among international students. In general, the students in my study claim to have had limited or no pre-college experience with the types of genres that define much of academic writing in the U.S., but they certainly did not arrive to college as *tabula rasas*. To this extent, my study deepens and complicates the existing knowledge about international students’ pre-college experiences. However, the study also makes two more contributions. First, by centering students’ own perceptions of their writing passages, as documented through interview data, I explore their first encounters with the rhetorical reality of U.S. higher education, with particular focus on their new discoveries and challenges. As the data show, these discoveries and challenges are deeply intertwined with the cultural and ideological trials that accompany the experience of moving to a new country. Second, by drawing on insights gained from listening to students, I suggest classroom interventions that can help FYC instructors. Given the large numbers of international students enrolled in U.S. higher education today, this is an area of immediate need. Thus, this article represents an effort to draw on empirically developed insights as a direct source of pedagogical decision-making.

Study and Methodology

Longitudinal, qualitative case studies allow composition researchers to engage with “dimensions of writing beyond the linguistic or textual” (Morton et al. 3). As Flyvbjerg notes, such studies offer the best chance for insight on “detail, richness, completeness, and variance,” as well as on “developmental factors” and the role of context in shaping choices (301; see also Duff; Leki, *Undergraduates*; Spack; Sternglass). Since the study described here is scheduled to last four years, it will offer ample opportunity to observe various kinds of development. In particular, my ongoing engagement with research participants has revealed how their passages through college entail complex experiences of change, growth, and challenge, as they aim to craft new identities vis-à-vis a range of local and global discourses. Academic writing becomes one of the sites through which such work happens. (As of this publication, the study is in its fourth year.)

A few notes are in order about the nine research participants. First, they were recruited during the 2015-2016 academic year through a range of methods, including visits by me to first-year writing classrooms, email solicitations delivered by the university's office of international students, and emails forwarded to students by other instructors. Two of the students were in my own composition classes before the period of the study, and one took a FYC class from me after enrolling in the study. Second, given the fact that participation was completely voluntary and depended on student initiative, the sample is not a representative linguistic or national cross-section of the international students enrolled at my university or at institutions across the U.S. Third, not all of the students use English as an additional language, as two are from Nigeria. Fourth, while all but one of the students in the study were in their first year at my institution during the time of most data collection included here, not all were technically first-year students, as two had arrived as "international transfer students" after completing a year of studies at an educational center in the home country as part of a "pathways" program.

For the above reasons, my data do not adhere to simple dichotomies between L1 and L2 writers, or between traditional first-year and transfer students. However, the realities of student demographics and FYC classrooms are anything but simple, regarding both the language backgrounds of students and their diverse paths to a college degree. Thus, my research sample mirrors some of the real-world dynamics that define international students today.

Study data include transcripts from interviews with the students conducted by me once each academic quarter (typically 45-60 minutes each); students' written texts from FYC and other classes, including both traditional class papers and multimodal projects from online portfolios; and interviews with selected faculty who taught the students. The faculty interviews have been based on student recommendations and consent, and have included one first-year writing faculty member who taught multiple students, and, as of this publication, two faculty members in other disciplines. Topics for the student interviews were wide-ranging, guided by the interview script approved by the Institutional Review Board, and including attention to students' writing experiences in both an L1 and English before enrolling at a U.S. university, their ongoing experiences with academic writing in both FYC and other courses, and their broader academic experiences. However, each interview involved a great deal of "give-and-take" between interviewer and interviewee, according to which "questions and discussion items are added or combined as the interview unfolds" (Holstein and Gubrium 56).

After all interviews were transcribed in full by a student assistant and reviewed by me, the assistant and I followed a procedure of coding for themes, finding patterns, making interpretations, and building theory (Ellis and Barkhuizen 259). Throughout the process, data were analyzed and reanalyzed, and the transcripts and student texts were read recursively (Dörnyei 244). Additionally, in interviews with students that occurred in the second year of the study—after original analysis of the data and concurrently with the drafting of this article—hypotheses and conclusions were discussed with participants as part of a process that ethnographers and other researchers describe as letting participants "talk back." This also allowed the students to expand on some of their earlier comments.

In line with my interest in student passages, my approach to the data is phenomenological. As Moustakas describes such research, the aim "is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions general or universal meanings are derived..." (13; see also Packer 155-56). Taking a similar approach in her own study of international college writers, Siczek emphasizes the value of such an approach "to develop an understanding of one's experiences in educational settings, particularly when participants may be on the linguistic and cultural margins of the dominant community" (19). I am also interested in understanding how experiences of educational passage look from international students' unique points of view. To this extent, my lens is openly subjective in its emphasis on student perceptions and on my own interpretations of those perceptions. This approach represents a methodological choice, but it is also an epistemological orientation. The idea that we should listen to and understand our students is not new to writing studies; however, within the realm of scholarship, centering student experiences is the exception, not the norm.

Given the three research questions guiding this article (restated below), I have placed primary emphasis on student interview data (question 1), and secondary emphasis on student texts (question 2); an instance of faculty interview data has been included to help address question 3. The following sections of the article present findings for each of the three research questions:

1. What are the writing backgrounds of international students?
2. What are some key experiences of challenge and discovery for these students as they transition into U.S. college writing?
3. How might answers to these questions suggest pedagogic interventions?

What are the Writing Backgrounds of International Students?

[Table 1](#) presents a snapshot of the students' self-described writing backgrounds. One immediate observation is that several students describe their writing educations as limited, or virtually non-existent. Also, only one student (Tao) claims to have arrived with experience in both research writing and citation. Other than that, there is wide diversity among the types of writing preparation, as might be expected among students from five different countries. [\[5\]](#)

Table 1. Overview of pre-college writing experiences. (All names are pseudonyms.)

Student	Country of origin	Writing experience in L1	Writing experience in English	Research writing
Anna	Poland	Extensive writing, often about literature and art; preparation for high school exit exam (the <i>Matura</i>).	Preparation for English <i>Matura</i> , which requires short essays on generic topics.	Occasionally conducted internet research in Polish but without expectation of citations.
Ewa	Poland	Wrote in high school, mainly in preparation for the <i>Matura</i> .	Preparation for college entrance exams (SAT and TOEFL).	None.
Faisal	Saudi Arabia	Almost none.	None in high school; some practice in intensive English program in the U.S.	None.
Omar	United Arab Emirates	Very little; what was taught focused primarily on grammar rather than content.	In high school wrote short essays, reports, and reflections.	Conducted internet research but without expectation of citations.
Saad	Saudi Arabia	In high school wrote primarily creative works for extracurricular writing competitions.	Very little in high school; some practice in intensive English program in the U.S.	None.
Seyefa	Nigeria	N/A; all schooling was in English.	Very limited writing in high school, mainly short responses to questions.	None.
Tao	China	Extensive writing in high school, including book reports and research papers.	Completed last two years of high school in the U.S.; wrote mostly book reports and personal essays.	Required to research and cite for high school classes.
Viola	Nigeria	N/A; all schooling was in English.	Extensive writing in high school, including essays focusing on literature and poems.	Occasionally conducted internet research but without expectation of citations.
Zahra	Saudi Arabia	Very little.	Very little in high school, but some practice in intensive English language program in the U.S.	None.

Drawing more deeply from the data, three dominant themes emerge: 1) of the students who did practice writing in high school, most of the texts they wrote were relatively short; 2) writing was often connected to test preparation; 3) high school writing tasks were often literary or creative. Regarding the length of papers, Seyefa, from Nigeria, recalled that there was not much writing in her high school, and that a typical assignment might be to “write short paragraph... maybe after holidays. ‘How did you spend your holiday?’” Zahra, from Saudi Arabia, said that her writing experience in Arabic was “almost zero” (a view echoed by another Saudi student in the study), and that the only writing she recalled doing in high school English classes was “one paragraph, which is about five, six lines.” Omar, from the United Arab Emirates, remembered his Arabic classes as “just grammar.” In English classes he did have to

write papers, but he recalls that “it wasn’t more than one or one-and-half pages.” In all, of the nine research participants, only two (Aneta and Tao) reported that they did extensive writing in high school. This result dovetails with Spack’s observations about Yuko, who wrote very little in Japanese when she was in high school, as well as with Ferris’ claim that international students’ pre-college writing experiences can involve mostly grammar practice.

Encountering writing as a form of test preparation was another common theme. A stark example comes from Poland, where students spend much of their high school careers preparing for a grueling exit exam, the *Matura*, which is taken in Polish and two other selected subjects. Aneta, who took the *Matura* in English as one of her chosen subjects, explained that all of the English writing she did in high school revolved around the three genres that might appear on the exam: letter, story, and argumentative essay. Thus, for three years she honed her ability to write 250-word essays in these genres. Other students also connected writing practice to test preparation, especially the SAT and the TOEFL, and these observations echo Lawrick’s finding that many international students point to college entrance exam preparation as a key site of pre-college English writing.

Another topic that appears in the interview data of five participants is a perception of writing as deeply connected to the production and analysis of literary genres. Zahra, for example, expressed this view: “I kind of grew up thinking of writing as an art, as drawing or music, something not really important. ... If you chose to write, just write. It’s not something you have to do, but it’s just, it’s a way of expressing yourself like, like drawing, painting or something.” Similarly, Violet told me that she had won an award as “overall best English student” at her Nigerian high school, and that she had a wonderful teacher who encouraged her in writing poems, which she performed at school events such as graduation. However, upon arriving for college in the U.S., her feelings of confidence evaporated: “So, those things made me feel, like, when it comes to writing, I don’t have a problem. But compared to, like, the U.S. standard, my writing is just crap.”

In sum, it is fair to say that these nine students arrived at college with limited, and in some cases very limited, experience as academic writers. Moreover, those who did have previous school-based writing practice typically worked in short genres. Importantly, these findings overlap with some of what we know about the experiences of U.S.-educated students. Researchers emphasize that many U.S. students also write too little to prepare them for college (Applebee and Langer); that high school writing is often focused on test preparation (Applebee and Langer; Denecker; Fanetti et al.); and that the analysis of creative or literary texts still dominates high school English (Yancey et al.). However, it would be a mistake to assume that these points of overlap indicate parallel experiences or preparation. For example, it is hard to imagine that any U.S.-educated college student could claim that his or her high school writing experience in English was “almost none,” or that eight out of nine U.S.-educated students could say that they had never practiced any form of research writing that included citations.^[6] Furthermore, while there is a growing culture of standardized testing in the U.S., high school education does not culminate in a nationally administered exit exam that will determine if one graduates.

Thus, the findings here emphasize the extent to which international students are products of highly divergent cultural and national belief systems around the teaching of writing, and these systems largely determine what they know when they arrive in FYC classes. From a pedagogic and administrative perspective, the crucial issue is understanding how these students’ background experiences shape their passages into college writing.

What are Key Points of Challenge and Discovery for International Students?

Violet’s description of once seeing herself as a strong high school writer, and then believing that she had become a college student whose writing is “just crap,” highlights the fraught nature of entering a new rhetorical reality. Clearly, she believes that her previous writing education did not appropriately prepare her for what she would discover in college. Research on U.S.-educated college writers presents similar findings. For example, Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak note that many U.S.-educated students arrive at college with “absent prior knowledge,” regarding, for example, non-fiction texts (108-111). Since their encounters with school-based reading and writing have often been focused on literary works, some students try to “draw upon and generalize their experience with imaginative texts in ways that are at odds with what college composition instructors expect...” (110). In another case, they describe a FYC student who believes he was “brainwashed” by his high school experience of repeatedly writing five-paragraphs essays to prepare for a standardized test. This leads him to conclude that he had never experienced a “real” writing course before arriving to college (107). Gilliland highlights similar findings in a study of U.S.-educated multilingual writers transitioning into college. She notes that one of her research participants felt that he never learned “foundational writing skills” as a high school student, while another recognized that high school English had not prepared her to engage with different audiences (30-31; see also Lay et al.).

In an effort to organize my research participants’ views on their points of challenge and discovery, I have highlighted

three themes that emerged from analysis of interview data and student writing. These are framed in relation to foundational heuristics within writing studies: writing is situated, writing is systematic, and writing is dialogic.

Writing is Situated

Given the limited pre-college writing experiences of several participants, it is not surprising that some are struck by the realization that writing is situated, by which I mean that writing can happen in multiple genres, for multiple audiences, and with multiple rhetorical goals. Entering an academic context in which they are asked to write diverse types of assignments for diverse audiences can be daunting. As one example, Faisal, a Psychology major, told me about the problems he had writing papers for a literature class on James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The issue was not so much that the text was difficult—he had gotten an audiobook to help him move through the novel slowly and deliberately—but rather that he was producing assignments in the wrong genre. As he explained:

I was really, really bothered because I couldn't write as well of a paper. I was expecting myself to present something wow—wowing. But in reality... I haven't taken any classes where we tackle that kind of thing, and I wasn't really aware of the difference between creating an argumentative paper or just a reflective paper. [I] remember when my professor told me, "Oh, you like writing a reflective paper." And I'm like, "I don't know what's the difference." When I go in, I just, I'm just trying to express and then end up being reflective. ... I was like, "Oh, okay. What's the distinction from argument paper?"

Fortunately, the professor worked with him one-on-one, so he could understand the differences between the genres. He also allowed Faisal some leeway in the style of his papers.

Another dimension of discovering the situatedness of writing is the realization that different academic audiences have different expectations. Zahra, an Animation major, told me that in her department professors openly state their disinterest in language: "...all of them say, 'Don't focus so much on grammar and sentence structure and everything. We are probably... worse than you in writing. So just write about the topic we're talking about.'" Three other students also highlighted their discovery that, unlike composition instructors, many faculty are not concerned with conventional citation formatting.

Surely all first-year college writers must learn that writing is situated in these and other ways. However, a unique dimension of international student passages is that the situatedness of writing is embedded within a cultural situatedness. That is, the question of how to compose and frame any specific piece of academic writing is wrapped up in uncertainty about the very culturally specific nature of genres and audience expectations.

Writing is Systematic

Beginning to see writing as systematic, by which I mean an activity that involves steps and processes, is an experience of discovery shared by nearly all of my research participants. For composition theorists in the U.S., thinking of writing as a systematic process has long been passé. However, process pedagogy is deeply embedded in the teaching of college composition, and the notion that there might be identifiable stages of writing is novel for most international students. [\[7\]](#)

In the case of Violet, her first-year writing professor's emphasis on the process was frustrating. As she described it in a reflection for her online class portfolio, "The approach to writing given by the professor is not what I have been used to. My other professors told me *what* to write, but not *how* to write" [my emphasis]. She later explained to me that her professor's insistence that she submit various assignments in preparation for the final research project was antithetical to her style: "If my paper is due tomorrow, I'll start, like, last minute... But with [her composition instructor], you just can't do that, because he is requiring—like, I need to see your bibliography and see your proposal. And I'm like, 'Why do you need that? Don't worry—I'm going to write your essay!'"

Her colleague, Seyefa, another Nigerian who took the same composition class, had a more positive reaction to process pedagogy. She included these comments in her online portfolio reflection for the course: "Writing in process encourages you to structure your points well. It also enhances and improves your ability to identify mistakes and errors." She told me that the insights she gained about the writing process were supporting work in other classes. In her major, International Studies, professors were also requiring citation lists and annotated bibliographies in preparation for final papers, and she appreciated this: "You're actually breaking down why you want the source, why, you know, where you got it from, its quality... So you write, you get your proposal, you get feedback—you always get feedback, so you're always on track."

The comments from both Violet and Seyefa highlight the extent to which the process approach is not cross-cultural. They also reveal that international students can see this as an instance of positive discovery (Seyefa) or distinct challenge (Violet). Certainly, the approach of the instructor has the potential to help students see this more positively, and as I will discuss in the final section of the article, careful scaffolding of writing heuristics is especially important for this population.

Writing is Dialogic

It is a commonplace that rhetoric and language are inherently dialogic. In calling writing dialogic here, however, I want to emphasize the extent to which many U.S. academic writing tasks entail interacting directly with other rhetors, or situating a topic within broader conversations surrounding an issue. Above all, research writing fits this description. As noted, the majority of students claimed no previous experience with research writing—and for three of the four students who did, “research” involved pulling pieces of information from the internet with no expectation of citation. Thus, unsurprisingly, documented research papers pose a significant challenge.

On multiple occasions, Aneta expressed her frustration with research writing. Besides the citation processes, which she found baffling due to the more liberal notions of intellectual property she had encountered in Poland, the expectation to incorporate others’ words and ideas into her own texts seemed contrived:

I’m used to write different things from Poland. Like we use the literature, but to confirm what we are saying. Like, “Okay, is love a good thing or a bad thing?” My opinion is that it’s a bad thing because, because of two examples, *Romeo and Juliet* or something... [B]ut this kind of thing I’ve never wrote. So it’s really weird. It’s like ... I have to use other people’s words? This is weird. I don’t really understand it.

Her specific way of discussing the issue may be unique, but the general perception of dialogic writing and research as uniquely challenging runs through the commentaries of three other participants. Such experiences exemplify the kind of “triple learning” described by Palmer. Not only are these students learning the mechanics of citation, but they are also learning a specific brand of rhetorical dialogism that is embedded in U.S. cultural belief systems.

On the other hand, Omar, who wrote a research paper for one of his composition classes on recruitment tactics of terrorist organizations in the Middle East, felt that his new encounters with academic writing had political resonance. As he explained, the realization that writing can be dialogic—or *safely* dialogic—represented an embodiment of intellectual freedom: “[Y]ou can have your own opinion here. ... [A] lot of people are gonna attack you for your own opinion... but you have your opinion here ... you won’t go to jail for it.” This is probably not a belief that his composition professors explicitly promoted, but it is implicit in the work he did for his research paper. To be clear, I do not want to suggest that the idea of putting one’s voice in dialogue with other voices was necessarily new for Omar. Rather, the U.S. composition classroom—and more broadly the U.S.—seems to have given him a space in which he could do this without fear of negative repercussions.

How Can International Student Passages Suggest Pedagogic Interventions?

Although the passages of these nine research participants cannot be generalized to all international students, I can assume that they sound familiar to many writing faculty. Furthermore, they intersect directly with the challenges and discoveries of U.S.-educated students, even if there are important differences in depth and degree. Much of that difference can be attributed to the extra challenge of trying to understand the practices and discourses of higher education when they are embedded in a foreign cultural and ideological milieu. In this final section, I draw on the findings described above to offer three broad heuristics that can guide approaches to FYC.

Gather Information

One clear insight that emerges from the data is that teachers and administrators should avoid making assumptions about the backgrounds of international students. This may sound obvious, but stereotypes about international students abound, whether they are positive or negative, and some of the literature can homogenize the background experiences of international students. A manageable intervention for improving a teacher’s ability to recognize diverse needs is to devote time at the beginning of each academic year and each course to gathering information. In focusing on U.S.-educated Latinx students, Ruecker argues for both program-level surveys and course-specific assignments, including literacy narratives and projects that ask them to map out their participation in various discourse communities (*Transiciones* 156-157). Composition instructors typically include a diagnostic writing assignment at the start of a course, but it may be necessary to tailor that assignment to discover more specific

information about student backgrounds. Additionally, a simple survey including the following kinds of questions can provide valuable information:

- If you went to high school in a language other than English, what kinds of writing assignments did you complete?
- What kinds of high school writing assignments did you complete in English, if any?
- Have you ever written a research paper with sources and citations? If so, explain how you wrote the paper.
- Have you ever used strategies such as participating in peer review, writing multiple drafts of papers, and making improvements based on a teacher's feedback? Please explain any of those experiences.

Although it is not realistic to expect an instructor to alter course content or assignments for each student, it is reasonable to imagine that instructors can adjust the ways they shape assignments, class activities, and feedback. As a FYC faculty member who taught multiple students included in the study told me in an interview, she has learned that international students often arrive with limited practice in the mechanics of research writing: "...there are students who have done writing, but they haven't done citation. Their grasp of summary and paraphrasing and quoting is very shaky. Most of the time, though, they've heard of it. It's just not mastered yet." In response, she has learned to adjust the pacing of her FYC classes for multilingual students in order to devote more time to building these skills. This has sometimes meant cutting out one of the writing assignments that she typically uses in a mainstream section of the same class, but the extra attention given to key research writing skills has allowed students to produce stronger final projects.

Scaffold Rhetorical Knowledge

One important feature of the three themes I highlighted in the data—writing as situated, systematic, and dialogic—is that they are more rhetorical than linguistic. This mirrors my earlier observations about the problems of classifying international students merely as “multilingual.” To be clear, students whose previous educations were not in English continue to need and crave linguistic support from writing instructors. In my own work with multilingual students, I treat formative feedback on the linguistic features of their texts as imperative, and even as an “ethical obligation” (Evans et al. 446-447; see also Schneider 361-363). However, linguistic challenge is something that international students who are English language learners are well aware of when they decide to pursue higher education in the U.S. What may be less obvious to them—and their FYC teachers—is the extent to which the passage into college writing can demand a profound shift in beliefs about the production and reception of texts.

To this end, instructors should attend explicitly and recursively to the rhetorical dimensions of writing, including U.S. heuristics for composition. Such topics are central to many FYC curricula, and they are prominently reflected in the WPA “Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition.” However, teachers and administrators must ensure that these outcomes are reflected in everyday classroom practices, and that rhetorical knowledge, including the writing process, is demystified. A comment from one of Aneta's reflective writings in an online FYC portfolio highlights her own lack of presumed knowledge, and the extent to which her passage through the course allowed her to build that knowledge. Reflecting on the group and peer collaboration required in the course, which was new to her, she writes, “Working in group is something that happens very often during academic life and also in further path of career. This is through an ability which some people are born with, others have to learn it. I belong to the second group, so although working in group some time ago was a nightmare for me, now it's not that bad anymore.” Ewa, also from Poland, shared similar thoughts on peer review in a reflection for her composition portfolio:

Throughout this class I experience group work with the classmates, what was something completely new for me. We were exchanging our papers and being critical readers, we were providing each other feedback and suggestions how to improve each other's papers in terms of what the author expects us to provide the feedback. I was never aware of the fact that peer review might be as useful and beneficial as it actually was.

In the case of demystifying research writing, in particular, instructors need to begin with activities, discussions, and assignments that help students understand research as an intellectual and rhetorical endeavor. As described, I have integrated this work into my own teaching of international students in recent years, as I now include activities and discussions that allow students from a range of rhetorical backgrounds to begin conceptualizing the work of research—or, more broadly, to develop an understanding of academic writing as a dialogic process of reading/listening and responding. A heuristic I have found useful in this regard is *the public sphere*, which I use to guide a range of homework and class activities that help students prepare to compose the documented research paper. Starting with the notions of the public sphere and public debate helps students recognize academic research as a specific genre that adheres to a broader and more popular form of rhetorical exchange with which they may feel more familiar (see

the [Appendix](#) for more details).

Be Flexible

If international students are to be more than global “consumers” who increase institutional revenue, local community members need to be open to learning from newcomers and making adjustments to meet their needs (Coate and Rathnayake). For faculty, this means not expecting students of diverse backgrounds simply to accept and conform to dominant writing and academic cultures; rather we should make thoughtful choices that support students’ transitions into those cultures and also, importantly, be ready to renegotiate our own practices in light of students’ pre-existing cultural knowledge (Canagarajah 12-13; see also Siczek 7-8). In her work on transfer Nowacek offers a related perspective, noting that students’ attempts to transfer previous knowledge to new tasks are not inherently successful or unsuccessful; rather “it is the instructor who has the power to decide whether to recognize and whether to reward or punish a given instance of transfer” (37). This suggests a powerful heuristic for the teaching of international students: We should seek ways to ensure that these students’ unique efforts to apply pre-college knowledge—including knowledge gained in other cultural, institutional, and linguistic realms—have relevance. An example of such practice by an instructor comes from Violet, who told me about her research paper at the end of a FYC class. Her paper was focused on the topic of African food, and specifically on daily practices around food and food preparation. After visiting the library and not finding the kinds of scholarly sources that were required, she became frustrated and contacted her professor: “I actually emailed him like, ‘I’m finding it so hard to do this paper... because you want scholarly sources. I do not have scholarly sources. My topic doesn’t even sound scholarly.’ I mean, it’s food.” The instructor agreed to let her use internet sources that were not scholarly, but she was expected to demonstrate their validity, sometimes by corroborating them with her own knowledge. In this way, her own cultural background knowledge was given value in the space of the FYC class.

In my own classes, I have gotten better in recent years about taking international students’ cultural schemata into consideration when selecting class readings and topics. After some unsuccessful efforts to have students read somewhat detailed historical texts about political developments in our city, I redesigned a FYC course so that all class readings would be equally accessible to everyone, regardless of background. Furthermore, I specifically seek out texts and create assignments that offer spaces to integrate global insights (see the [Appendix](#) for more details).

The idea of flexibility also applies to program-level decisions. Given the diverse backgrounds of international students, and the extent to which this diversity may require more scaffolding and individualized attention, there is compelling rationale to reconsider the kinds of composition classes that are offered. There is a long-standing debate about the best placements for multilingual students (Costino and Hyon; Ortmeier-Hooper; Ruecker, “Improving”; Saenkhum), and there certainly is not an ideal answer for all institutions. However, the data presented in this article suggest that there may be good basis for designing unique FYC sections for international students—and not just for the broad and diverse population of multilingual students. Such a class would attend primarily to these students’ unique rhetorical and cultural positionings, in addition to their linguistic needs.

From Passages to Pedagogy

My immediate goal in this article has been to address three questions that may have practical value for FYC instructors and administrators. However, a broader goal, as outlined in the introduction, is bringing the growing discourse on student writers’ transitions from high school to college to this specific population. Thanks to years of work in applied linguistics and second language writing, we know a great deal about international students as multilingual writers, but we still have much to learn about their passages from diverse educational backgrounds around the globe into the specific expectations of FYC and U.S. academia.

Beyond these points, this article is an argument for the importance of listening to our students—all of our students—and honoring their passages, whatever they may be. Probably no writing professionals would disavow such an orientation, but it falls on faculty and administrators to *actively create opportunities* for such work. As described, this can happen at the program and classroom levels, as well as in the context of research projects and professional development events, such as the one described at the beginning of this article. Listening to students can provide a needed antidote to the institutional (and societal) emphasis on goals, outcomes, and achievements. Determining how we can help students arrive at designated places is important and necessary curricular work. However, a results-oriented approach can diminish our appreciation for students’ own experiences of moving through the designs that we create. Recognizing student passages encourages us to attend to the depth and variety of those experiences, which can, in turn, provide foundation for pedagogical reorientations.

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Appendix

Notes

1. From 2005 to 2017 the number of international students in the U.S. increased by nearly 91%, and there are now 1.07 million students, which is a historic high (*Open Doors*). This development reflects a more or less transparent effort by institutions to find new revenue, as international students typically pay full fare and, in some cases, even an extra “international” fee (Lewin). There are now new questions about future enrollments, in light of a U.S. president who expresses unabashedly ethno-nationalist and racist views, and who has attempted to impose various travel bans and “extreme vetting” that would directly affect specific countries, regions, or populations (Patel). According to data from the 2016-2017 academic year, 55% of institutions in the U.S. reported growing or stable enrollments of international students, while 45% noted a drop in new students (*Open Doors*). However, even if there is a short-term downturn in the immediate future, which is very possible, it is hard to imagine that numbers will not remain relatively high. Quite simply, globalization and the push for internationalization are stronger forces than the statements of a single U.S. president. ([Return to text.](#))
2. There has been a shift in the usage of such terms within writing studies in recent years, primarily as a response to important questions about the political implications of the word choices (see Ortmeier-Hooper; Ruecker and Ortmeier-Hooper 4-5). However, the terms “L2” and “ESL” still have currency within applied linguistics. For example, the newest (3rd) edition of Ferris and Hedgcock’s authoritative book on the topic has been retitled *Teaching L2 Composition* from *Teaching ESL Composition*. ([Return to text.](#))
3. When international students and resident immigrant students—sometimes formerly known as “Generation 1.5”—are categorized together as “multilingual” students, it is typically the latter population who is underserved by such a conflation. Scholars have made important strides over the last two decades in earning unique recognition for this group of students, who face both linguistic challenges and broader sociopolitical challenges due to their status as immigrants, and often as racial minorities (Kanno and Harklau; Kanno and Kangas; Ruecker, *Transiciones*). Unfortunately, the arrival of more international students in recent years has shifted some of the attention away from immigrant writers again (Ortmeier-Hooper and Ruecker). Ideally, both of these populations, and other populations, can earn the unique (and sometimes overlapping) kinds of attention that will support success. ([Return to text.](#))
4. Of the more than one million international students in the U.S., well over 20% are from countries that have largely English-medium education systems, such as India and Nigeria (*Open Doors*). ([Return to text.](#))
5. Within any of these countries, the range of K-12 educational experiences is undoubtedly diverse. I do not presume that my research participants’ experiences are representative of the broader experience within their home countries. ([Return to text.](#))
6. Reiff and Bawarshi report that among FYC students who responded to a survey at a large public university in the U.S., 96% identified the research paper as the top academic genre with which they had had experience before college (312). Similarly, Addison and McGee note that high school writing teachers rank the research paper as one of the most important writing assignments for juniors and seniors (164). ([Return to text.](#))
7. While studies indicate that the process approach may take different forms in U.S. high schools and colleges (Fanetti, Bushrow, and DeWeese 79-80), it is generally widespread practice in U.S. high schools (Applebee and Langer 21; Patterson and Duer 82). ([Return to text.](#))

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