Working with Multilingual Students: Strategies for KPU Faculty

Multilingual Students in Post-Secondary Education: What are the Issues?
KPU benefits from the cultural and linguistic diversity of its student body. Sixty percent of KPU students speak a language other than English at home. While multilingual students have a higher rate of post-secondary participation than the general Canadian population, they also experience difficulties completing university writing requirements, and graduate with lower than average grades (Roessingh & Douglas, 2012). Furthermore, students who graduate without strong English language abilities face significant employment barriers, despite their successful completion of a university program (Cogie, Lorinskas, & Strain, 1999).

Multilingual students at KPU could be seen to have several key needs as they progress through undergraduate education:

- To continue the high-level language and cultural acquisition necessary to pursue future educational and employment goals.
- To pursue academic growth in an environment that acknowledges their cultural heritage, linguistic abilities in all languages, and learning strengths.
- To be able to progress through their academic program at an appropriate pace without undue hindrance from language-related issues.

Success in these three areas requires collaboration between students, faculty, and learning support services.

Who are our multilingual learners at KPU? What are their needs?
KPU's multilingual learners are a diverse group with varied needs. Within this diversity, there are two broad groupings of learners:

- Students who *primarily* learned English through ESL programs. This includes students who completed English Language Studies at KPU, as well as those who studied English as a foreign language in preparation for studies in Canada.
- Students who completed a significant portion of their education in Canada, yet speak a language other than English at home. Their needs may reflect the number of years they have been in Canada.

Typical Characteristics of Multilingual Learners

	Primarily Learned English Through ESL Programs	*Primarily Educated in Canada*
Listening and Speaking Skills	- May understand standard/formal English, but misunderstand idioms, slang, and cultural references' - May have pronunciation patterns that reflect their first language	- Often appear fluent (particularly in social conversation), but may still be acquiring more complex, technical vocabulary and grammatical knowledge

Reading and writing skills	• May have a strong knowledge of English grammar, and understand explanations that involve grammatical terminology • May have difficulties applying their grammatical knowledge to "real-world" writing activities • May rely heavily on bilingual dictionaries • May use words in ways that atypical for native speakers	• Reading and writing skills may appear weaker than speaking skills, particularly for students who arrived in Canada more recently
Use of academic language	• Writing style and organization may reflect the organization patterns typical of the students' home cultures	• Students who have spent fewer than 5-7 years in an English-language school system may require additional time and support to acquire and use academic conventions • May inappropriately use informal, spoken language in academic contexts

Theoretical Considerations
Perspectives on Language Acquisition: ESL

Students who learned English through ESL programs, whether at KPU or elsewhere, are still actively engaged in a process of language and culture acquisition. Students who complete English Language Studies at KPU or who achieve the minimum English proficiency scores for admission to KPU will generally have achieved the English skill level described as *Advanced*. However, they are still working to achieve *Superior* or *Distinguished* proficiency. The following table summarizes the skills typical of learners at each level:

Advanced/ Emerging Superior Proficiency	**Superior/ Distinguished Proficiency**
• Can understand most topics spoken at a regular rate of speech, particularly in one's area of specialization • Has good control over the most frequent grammatical structures, though may make errors on more infrequent or complex structures • Has a strong general vocabulary, but may lack understanding of small differences between words	• Able to use English fluently and accurately in academic and professional situations • Pronunciation is clear • Able to write extended texts on abstract topics effectively • Can use vocabulary precisely • Grammar errors are typically minor and do not interfere with understanding

• May make mistakes related to register (formal vs. informal, conventions for writing within a specific discipline) • Is beginning to represent abstract ideas in writing • Typically cannot accurately use the stylistic or organizational patterns of the language	• Follows the organizational patterns and rhetoric typical of the genre they are writing • Able to adapt their style of writing to the needs of specific audiences

In summary, many ESL students at KPU are working to move from the advanced to superior/distinguished proficiency levels. The growth in language skills needed to move to the highest levels of English ability typically requires several years of focused study and exposure to English in academic or work contexts, and thus it is expected that progress will be incremental over the course of a student's full academic career.

Non-native English Speakers Educated in Canada

Many KPU students completed several years of their secondary school education within the Canadian system, yet are non-native speakers of English. Some of these students may appear quite fluent in English, and yet may have difficulty using the conventions of academic writing. Why might this be?

Cummins (1979, 2001) helpfully proposed a distinction between two types of language skills: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). Most EAL students educated in Canada will develop BICS within a two-year period, while CALP requires 5-7 years of education in an English language school system to develop. Therefore, some students who can communicate well may still be working to develop the level of more complex, academic language needed to successfully complete university level coursework. Consider, for example, that a native-speaking high school graduate may have a vocabulary of more than 18,000 word families (Roessingh & Douglas, 2012). Establishing CALP competency requires extensive vocabulary acquisition and exposure to the conventions of academic communication.

Supporting Multilingual Students in the Classroom
    A. Cultural Supports: While all students are adjusting to the new demands of university culture, the amount of new cultural knowledge to be gained by students who were educated primarily in another context is significant.
        a. Students from cultures that are more hierarchical may initially feel uncomfortable approaching instructors directly. Consider emphasizing the opportunity for KPU students to contact instructors with questions, or simply to show their interest in the course. You may also wish to require students to attend an initial brief appointment during office hours to familiarize them with the opportunity to meet with you.
        b. Students may be accustomed to larger classes with teacher-directed instruction, and may find participating in class challenging. Consider asking students to prepare and write a question or comment before class to contribute to the day's discussion. Students may also be more at ease speaking in small groups.

Consider dividing the class into smaller groups for discussion, and then allowing group representatives to present ideas to the larger class.

B. Language Supports:
    a. Research on high-level language learning demonstrates that participation in content courses effectively supports the development of advanced language skills. By modelling good English, particularly ways of communicating within your discipline, you will support students as they develop communication skills.
    b. Consider opportunities to use visual aids to supplement spoken lectures.

C. Reading Supports:
    a. Some students may have experienced educational systems where textbooks are typically significantly smaller than the Canadian norm, and so may not yet have developed the skills for reading efficiently and selecting main ideas. Students may have previously focused on more rote memorization of a smaller amount of material, and may require instruction on effective reading strategies for university and for your discipline. Encourage students to attend Academic Skills Workshops to develop their reading skills.
    b. Demonstrate strategies for effective reading. Encourage students to preview the text before reading and to grasp the larger structure and argument of the text. Some students may use bilingual dictionaries heavily to translate unknown words, significantly slowing their reading speed. Encourage students to practice identifying the meaning of unknown words from context, focusing on comprehending the text as a whole, rather than word-by-word.

D. Writing Supports:
    a. Second language writers can benefit from analyzing the features of the texts they will be writing. Before asking students to complete a written assignment, consider having students analyze a model assignment. Highlight features of successful writing, including the text structure and type of language that is used for specific purposes in the text.
    b. Consider allowing students to use an unmarked dictionary for in-class writing assignments. This mimics real-life conditions for writing, and allows students the opportunity to strive for correctness.
    c. Implement a process of drafts and revision in your course assignments. For example, you may allow students to submit a first draft for feedback, and later submit a second, improved assignment. Peer revision and consultation with writing tutors can also be embedded in the revision process.

Grading Multilingual Students' Writing: Considerations and Strategies

Grading multilingual students' writing involves balancing two key considerations: (1) the need for students to produce high-quality English communication that will enable their success at KPU and beyond and (2) the need to consider students' knowledge of course content and their current stage in the language acquisition process when evaluating their work.

How do I balance issues of content and language in grading?
Consider developing a grading rubric that clearly indicates the point value allocated for assignment content, and the point value allocated for quality of expression.

Separate higher-order from lower-order concerns. Higher-order concerns relate to the content and structure of the paper, and include the development of the thesis, the development

of arguments, the organization of the paper, and the development of ideas. Lower-order concerns include sentence structure, grammar, and mechanics. While managing all of these areas is required for strong writing, it is easy for the reader to become distracted by correcting lower-order concerns, thereby losing focus on the content and organization of the assignment. By putting lower-order concerns aside on the initial reading of an assignment, it may become easier to focus on the content presented.

Separate errors that affect meaning from errors that do not. The most serious errors are those that affect the meaning the student is trying to communicate, while other errors, though possibly distracting, do not affect the meaning conveyed. For example, neglecting an article (a/the) is unlikely to affect the overall meaning of the sentence, while using an incorrect verb tense may shift the meaning conveyed.

Consider whether the error can be explained by a grammatical rule, or whether it is idiomatic. Some aspects of English are not governed by regular rules, such as idioms and the prepositions that follow verbs. While it may be helpful to point out the correct form to a student, consider treating these types of errors less severely in evaluation.

Consider whether the student's expression is truly incorrect, or simply atypical. While some students may place a high priority on expressing themselves in standard North American English, others may prefer to retain more of their own cultural voice in their use of written English. In some cases, a student's written expression may be clear and understandable, while retaining some features that are different from Canadian English.

What error correction strategies are most helpful?

Minimal marking is usually sufficient. Providing specific correction of grammatical errors is usually not necessary, and typically does not result in significant improvement. Underlining or circling errors is usually sufficient. Many ESL students have strong knowledge of English grammar, but are still learning to apply that knowledge to their writing.

Help the student to identify patterns of error. Even when errors appear to be frequent, it is often the case that the same error has been made multiple times throughout the paper. For example, a paper with 20 errors may have only 3-4 error types. When possible, point the student towards patterns of error, rather than individual mistakes.

Encourage students to keep an error log. Keeping an error log, where students record errors made, the needed correction, and the error type, helps students to identify and target their most typical errors. Encourage students to proofread the paper carefully to correct their frequent errors (for example, to read the paper through slowly, focusing on correcting only one type of error at a time). This strategy helps students apply their existing knowledge to editing their own writing.

My student tends to make incorrect word choices. How do I help?

Encourage students to develop the vocabulary relevant to your discipline. Point out key words in lectures or texts, and encourage students to develop a strategy for memorizing these words and incorporating them into their writing.

Help students to distinguish technical terms from non-technical words. Some students wrongly assume that they must avoid repeating the same word in an assignment, and search for

a synonym for the term. Teach students to identify key technical words that must be used in a specific way.

Some students may have difficulty comprehending what they are reading. Encourage students to develop a variety of reading strategies to enhance their understanding of course readings and research sources.

Encourage students to use dictionaries and reference books effectively. Many students are over-reliant on bilingual dictionaries in their writing, and do not distinguish between the meaning of similar words in English. Encourage students to use an Advanced English Learner's Dictionary (for example, http://oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/). A learner's dictionary helps ESL students clarify that they have chosen the correct word for their intended meaning, and also provides clear examples of correct usage. Similarly, a thesaurus is difficult for non-native speakers to use effectively, as they are unable to distinguish between the connotations of similar words easily.

How might cultural differences affect organization and critical thinking?

Recognize that the cultural background of students may affect paper organization. For example, some students may have learned to write papers where an issue must be examined from all sides in a balanced way; these papers may seem to lack a clear argument or point of view. Other students may build up towards an argument that is most clearly presented at the end of a paper. Consider the paper as a whole when evaluating the quality of an argument. It may also be helpful to present the expected conventions of your discipline through a cross-cultural lens: you can affirm the validity of the student's home-culture style, while encouraging the student to consider adopting different patterns of logic and organization to succeed in their studies in Canada.

Recognize that some cultures prioritize correct understanding of authoritative sources over critical thinking. In Canada, critical thinking is introduced early in the curriculum, while in other cultures, acquiring the core knowledge and concepts of the discipline is prioritized. Students with this background may engage well with sources and appeal to authority, but may lack their own evaluation of the sources used. You may wish to include questions for further critical thought in your feedback to the student.

Supporting Multilingual Students' Writing Success
1. Consider grading holistically according to a clearly defined rubric. When giving feedback, include a response to the student's content.
2. Consider breaking larger assignments into steps, with opportunities for peer review, brief instructor feedback, and revision before submitting the final assignment.
3. Help students to identify key areas for improvement and set achievable goals. As students view themselves as high-level language and culture learners working towards professional proficiency in English, they can take greater accountability for their own learning progress.

Support for Faculty and Multilingual Students at KPU
1. Students may book individual appointments with a Writing tutor at the Learning Centres. Writing tutors do not proofread assignments, but work with students to help them develop stronger writing skills at any stage in the writing process. Writing tutors can work

with students to clarify a thesis, to develop the organization of their work, or to learn to edit their assignments effectively.
2. Learning Strategists can help students develop learning skills needed for success. This includes effective reading comprehension strategies, vocabulary development, writing skills, and goal setting.
3. Academic Skills Workshops, available on all campuses, allow students the opportunity to build study skills in an interactive learning environment. Academic Skills Workshops that are specifically designed to support multilingual learners are regularly offered, and additional workshops can be scheduled on request by contacting the Learning Centres. Available workshop topics include:
    - Write Clearly for University in Canada (explores academic writing from a cross-cultural perspective)
    - Self-Editing Techniques
    - Develop Your English Vocabulary
    - Connecting with Your Instructor
    - Successful Classroom Communication
    - Bicultural Learning Strategies (understanding cultural values when transitioning to a new educational context)
4. Learning Strategists can partner with faculty to create in-class sessions or discipline-specific workshops to support students in developing the skills needed for success.

Informed by:

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