



Articulating struggle: ESL students' perceived obstacles to success in a community college writing class



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ABSTRACT

There are several factors that contribute to a student's struggles in an ESL writing course, and for community college students, these are often exacerbated by additional challenges like multiple jobs, family demands, and negative prior educational experiences. The myriad challenges that students face can present many obstacles, including course failure and the necessity to repeat the required writing class again, resulting in frustration, anxiety, and a lack of motivation. Considering this issue and its prevalence across many community college developmental writing programs, this Short Communication shares findings from a semester-long qualitative study that focused on how four students, all of whom were repeating the same developmental ESL writing course for the second or third time, articulated their struggles in passing the course. Findings reveal that, when asked to discuss their challenges in detail, students rarely attribute their struggles to only one factor, and often students are not fully aware of the reasons for their challenges in a writing class. Encouraging students to reflect on and discuss their struggles gives both students and instructors a more nuanced perspective of obstacles within the class. This can in turn help both faculty and administrators support ESL students as they develop their L2 writing skills and progress through their academic programs

1. Introduction

ESL students in search of an accessible option for postsecondary education often turn to community colleges, which provide education to approximately 40% of all American undergraduates nationwide ([American Association of Community Colleges, 2015](#)). In New York City, where more than half the population speaks a language other than English at home ([New York City Department of City Planning, 2018](#)), the number of students enrolled in community colleges in the City University of New York, the largest urban university in the U.S., is reflective of the linguistic diversity of the city: Approximately 37% of students are foreign-born and nearly 50% speak a language other than English at home ([CUNY Office of Institutional Research, 2015](#)). Many of these incoming students self-identify as ESL, even if they have already attended a few years of high school in New York City, and based on entry exam scores in reading and writing, students are either eligible to enroll in credit-bearing composition courses or are placed into developmental reading and writing classes to further prepare them for college-level work. However, failure rates within these courses are considerable, resulting in students' frustration and anxiety when they are required to repeat the same writing course in a subsequent semester.

Although research has been conducted on a broad quantitative scale to understand reasons for failure among all students within reading, writing and math developmental courses at community colleges ([Jaggars, 2014](#)), scant qualitative research has been

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conducted to better understand ESL students' perceived reasons for failure within developmental writing courses at community colleges (Ruecker, 2014; Song, 2006). Using the theoretical framework of attribution theory (Weiner, 1979), this Short Communication presents data from a multiple case study that examines how ESL students articulate their struggles within an intensive writing course at a large urban community college in New York City. To investigate this issue, this study focused on the following two research questions:

- (1) How do ESL students frame their obstacles, struggles, and fears related to an academic writing course?
- (2) To what do repeat course takers in a community college ESL writing course attribute their lack of success?

While issues related to the students in this report are specific to ESL community college students in the U.S., the perceived obstacles of struggling students are relevant to the broader discussion about the writing development of English language learners in various secondary and post-secondary contexts.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Students' linguistic backgrounds and expectations within the community college context

There is a great deal of variation in the background and needs of students who either self-identify as ESL or who are placed into developmental ESL writing courses. As Razfar and Simon (2011) point out in their study of Latino community college students in California, ESL courses, while necessary in order to register for required college-level coursework, can serve vastly different purposes for students depending on their educational background. They note that a student who has recently arrived in the U.S. and who graduated high school in their home country will have different needs than a student who received a Graduate Equivalency Degree or is considered generation 1.5 because of interruptions in education (p. 598).

Regardless of their educational background, students are frequently frustrated and de-motivated by their placement in a developmental writing course since they are often not receiving credit towards their degree (Schnee & Shakoor, 2016), and the frustration is amplified if a student fails and is required to re-take the course. Salyers (2012) refers to this course repetition as the “fall-back position” and argues that the result is tremendous feelings of defeat for students (p. 69). This can be even more challenging when English proficiency – whether oral or written—is an issue (Goldschmidt & Seifried, 2008; Salyers, 2012), and students' perceptions of how they might have done in their academic courses does not often match their actual grades. Cox (2009) points out that there is a frequent mismatch between students' expectations and professors' expectations, resulting in frustration and lack of motivation. She argues that instructors have an instrumental role in this situation, and that “part of the instructor's responsibility involves understanding how students perceive the curriculum and the learning objectives and, when necessary, helping students revise their perceptions in a way that supports the instructor's vision of learning” (p. 87).

This gap between faculty and student expectations can be especially difficult to close, particularly within 15-week developmental writing courses. Salyers (2012) notes out that there is a great deal of pressure on both the students and the faculty, resulting in increasingly unrealistic expectations. She points out that community colleges across the country are looking for “faster outcomes with decreased budgets, mean that this task actually requires a Houdini-like maneuver – that of achieving within a single fifteen-week semester what six years of high school have failed to achieve” (p. 69). Further, for ESL students, a single semester is often not enough time to develop the written English proficiency necessary to move on to a credit-bearing English composition class.

2.2. Attribution of success and failure

Given the increasing pressure on both students and faculty for students to pass a course, it is important to ask students themselves why they feel they are succeeding and failing, particularly when stress related to failure can have a profoundly negative impact on L2 writers (Lee, 2018; Russel-Pinson & Harris, 2017). Attribution theory, hailing from social psychology, provides a useful framework to explore how students understand their own successes and failures (Fatemi & Asghari, 2012; Mohammadi & Sharififar, 2016). According to Weiner (1979), attributions “are the perceived causes that individuals select or construct for events in their lives. A basic assumption of attribution theory is that a person's understanding of the causes of past events influences his future actions” (p. 3).

Mohammadi and Sharififar (2016) conducted a quantitative study of 200 language learners in Iran and found that EFL students attribute their achievements to external (situational factors) more than internal factors (personal factors) and that students attributed their success and failure more often to ability and less often to luck. In another quantitative study, Gobel and Mori (2007) looked at attributions for both success and failure among 233 students studying English in Kyoto, Japan, and found that “attributions for failure seemed to focus on internal causes such as lack of ability and effort whereas attributions for success seemed to focus on external causes such as luck, teacher influence, and classroom atmosphere” (152). Both studies illustrate how factors like culture and educational context can influence attributions.

Within the U.S. community college context, Song's earlier research (2006) explored writing students' perceptions of success and failure and found that most students reported that they had internal struggles like low motivation, low effort, and self-doubt. Several students also reported that their struggles were the result of external factors like an instructor, a job, family responsibilities, insufficient preparation in high school, few interactions in English outside the classroom, and low levels of first language literacy. Ruecker (2014), in his research with Mexican-American students transitioning from high school to college in Texas, similarly found that students felt unprepared for college-level writing because of the singular way in which they were taught to write in high school.

This study builds on both Ruecker's and Song's research by using a case-study approach to explore the complexity of students' perceptions of failure, since a more focused lens can better help both students and instructors re-frame their conceptions of success and failure (Gobel & Mori, 2007).

3. Context of the study

NYCC¹ is a large, urban community college and is one of seven community colleges within the CUNY system. In 2016, approximately 27% of incoming students required remediation in writing (this number reflects all students; however, native and non-native English speakers enroll in separate developmental writing courses). For this study, I examined the experiences of repeating students in the highest level of ESL writing, called "Intensive Writing for ESL Students," in the fall 2015 semester, which I had previously taught for three semesters and was teaching at the time of the study. Intensive Writing for ESL Students is the highest level of three courses within the ESL developmental writing sequence, and students can place directly into the course or may be placed at a lower level and move into the course over time. Enrollment in the course is capped at 25 students, and in fall 2015, there were 10 sections of the course offered.

The study originated as a part of the Gateway Initiative, a college-wide program introduced at NYCC in 2015 to encourage faculty to experiment with innovative teaching methods in high failure "Gateway courses," or courses that students needed to pass to register for college classes within their majors. Because of my previous experience with the course and my observations of the large number of students who had to repeat the course, I elected to participate in this initiative, and my primary focus was on students who had to repeat the same course at least one additional time.

4. Methods

To understand students' perceptions of why they had failed the course, I developed a first-day questionnaire (Appendix A in Supplementary materials) whose purpose was two-fold: 1) I wanted to clearly identify the students who were repeating the course since that information was not readily available to me at the start of the semester, and 2) I hoped to ascertain how students identified their own strengths and weaknesses with reading and writing (although there is a separate developmental reading course, it includes both native and non-native English speakers). I determined that there were eight students out of 25 who were repeating the class, and while all of these students volunteered to participate in the study, only four followed through with the interview process.

The first written assignment for all students was a literacy narrative, or a written account of a literacy experience in either the student's native language or in English (Steinman, 2007). For students who were repeating the class, the students' assignment was edited to ask that they write a narrative about an obstacle they had faced in this same writing course in a previous semester. The prompt specifically asked them to include a detailed description of their experiences in previous ESL classes, a description of the type of college student they are, and what their previous ESL classes taught them about themselves and the way they learn. Thematic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008) was used to code for consistent themes regarding how they framed their prior struggles.

Students were then invited to meet with me for a semi-structured interview (Appendix B in Supplementary materials), where I asked more detailed questions about their experiences in previous semesters. Interview questions were designed to be broad and elicit discussion about the students' experiences (Charmaz, 2014), and they focused on students' perceived reasons for prior struggles as well as feelings upon entering the same class for the second or third time. These interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and coded thematically using a grounded theory approach which allowed me to repeatedly return to the data for more refined thematic coding (Charmaz, 2014; Riessman, 2008).

4.1. Participants

Four repeating students in my section (Table 1) participated in the study. Tanya was a student from Belarus who had been living in the U.S. for six years and was repeating the course for the third time; Samuel was a student from Haiti who had been living in the U.S. for 20 years and was repeating the class for the second time; Eva, from Brazil, had been living in the U.S. for 14 years and had taken the class once before, and Wei, from China, had been living in the U.S. for five years and was repeating the class for the second time. In our interviews, Tanya and Eva shared that they had children, and three students, Tanya, Eva, and Wei, reported that they had jobs off campus. Overall, the four students' experiences illustrate the fluidity between internal and external attributions as well as the thread connecting students' prior educational experiences to their current perceptions about failure in the writing course.

5. Findings

5.1. Internal attribution

"It's like there's something broken in me." –Tanya

In fall 2015, Tanya, a student from Belarus, had been living in the U.S. for six years, and she reported that she had been speaking

¹ This is a pseudonym.

Table 1
Participants.

Student name ^a	First language	Years living in the U.S.	Number of times enrolled in the course
Tanya	Russian	6	3
Wei	China	5	2
Samuel	Haiti	20	2.5
Eva	Portuguese	14	2

^a All names are pseudonyms.

English for four years, but she rarely spoke English outside the classroom. It was her third time taking the class and her second semester enrolled in my class. When I interviewed Tanya at the start of the semester in September, we talked about her experience in the class in the previous two semesters and how this connected to her current experience. She noted that she found a paper from a prior semester and “tried to read and remember.” When I asked her what she thought of her earlier writing, she explained:

T: It was better than now. I was surprised. Now I can’t write anymore like it was before...I think I need study and try to figure out how I did it.

HF: Well, do you think it was because you took a break between classes?

T: Yes, I had break. But I think it’s not why it’s happening now. It happened before because I... maybe...it’s not the break... It’s like there’s something broken in me. If you study, study, you can’t pass, you try to do. Finally, you don’t understand what is going on and you can do nothing...I don’t know. My language was more better in writing than now. I don’t know why.

Here Tanya attributes her struggle to an internal issue stemming from ongoing frustration, and she emphasizes the confusion and discouragement that she feels because of her consistent studying and inability to pass the exam. Although she acknowledges that this issue is “inside,” she still grapples with uncertainty as to why she is still struggling.

Samuel, on the other hand, had greater clarity when it came to his current difficulty with writing. He had been living in the U.S. for 20 years (after leaving Haiti) at the time that he enrolled in my class, and while he enrolled in the course for one full semester, he then repeated the class for only half of the next semester. On his first day questionnaire, he said he loved to write, and he also noted his difficulty speaking English, even though he has been living in the U.S. for two decades. In our interview, he elaborated,

I think something that I did which I recently regret cause I didn’t speak English a lot. They used to tell me speaking English instead of speaking Creole, but back then I was afraid of saying the wrong words, and today I see the result of it.

Samuel attributed his struggles to internal factors, recognizing the influence that his past actions may have on his current academic situation. He also acknowledged his struggles as someone who had an interrupted education and then returned to school later in life, and he felt that his challenges with academic rules continued to influence his performance in class.

Eva, the Brazilian student, explained in her essay that although she had previously taken the class, she began her semester feeling optimistic:

At the beginning of the spring 2015 semester, I was very happy to be taking [Intensive Writing]. I was also quite curious about how the professor could help me do better. As the semester progressed, I struggled with summarizing, grammar and nervousness. I could not understand the kind of writing that I was writing in class in preparation for the test...At first, I felt like a fish out of water... I tried to do what I believed was right, and ended up losing a lot of time reading or failing to understand new vocabulary because I read the article too slow.

Throughout her narrative essay she continued to discuss her specific struggles, and then concluded that anxiety was her primary obstacle to passing. She wrote:

...[N]ervousness and test anxiety are my biggest problems. They block me from trying to express ideas using words I do not normally use. When I become nervous the words and thoughts run away from me, and I’m completely unsure what to write.

Eva mentioned her anxiety in our interview as well, and when I looked back at her first day questionnaire, she also noted that “nervousness” prevented her from succeeding. However, in answer to the question about her weaknesses in writing, she wrote “Most of the time I write in my language then I translate in English.” Relying on an electronic translator may have contributed to her struggles with writing, and yet Eva did not highlight this strategy as problematic in her struggle to pass the class.

5.2. External attribution

“I have been out of school for long time, I had forgot the rules.” –Samuel

In Samuel’s narrative essay, he described his prior educational experiences, writing: “In January 2013, I received my GED certificate in the mail. I attempted for so many years to pass the GED, it has been a difficult road for me to pass this test... I always

thought writing was very easy and math was hard. I find out that here in NYCC math is easier than writing.” After getting his GED, Samuel decided to enroll in college, and he explained in his essay, that, “I was afraid at first, but I decide to face my fear.”

As Samuel reflected on his first semester in fall 2014, he felt that it was very difficult, in part because of his experience with a tutor at the college’s ESL lab. His narrative essay included the following paragraph:

[T]he person who was my tutor make me feel bad about myself, because I didn’t know my grammar. I told her that I had learned it, but I had forgot the rules. I have been out of school for long time, I had forgot the rules. The tutor told me I shouldn’t be in college if I don’t know your verb and grammar. I felt so bad that day, but she didn’t have to make me feel bad about myself, and she ask me those question in front of other student, that why I felt so bad and embarrass...

Samuel, after he had previously dropped out, was then paired with a tutor who made him feel that his academic English skills were not college-level. Samuel attributed his failure, in part, to this negative experience he had at the lab. Tanya also attributed her prior struggles to a professor, explaining in our interview, that in the level prior to this class, she had a challenging experience:

When I got [the prior level], I got professor, I liked her, but I think she give us stress, everybody in her class like stupid and cannot write. After that I stopped writing. I didn’t pass and after that I took one more time and I passed.

When reflecting on this earlier experience, Tanya felt that this professor hindered her from writing, and as a result, she did not pass the course and had to re-take that level before enrolling in the upper level writing course. Similarly, in Samuel’s narrative essay, he attributed his challenges in his subsequent ESL writing class to an external experience: the fact that much of the class was conducted using Blackboard, a web-based technology. He wrote,

Students had to do homework in the Blackboard site, that was where the professor posted the reading and writing assignments. That was not good things, I wish she could give an essay writing to do at home, but not with technology... Homework was hard to do, because of that.

When I asked Samuel why he dropped out of that class, he noted that it was because he had difficulty with the technology, and that he even when he was able to submit an assignment through Blackboard, he sent it “the wrong way.”

In addition to the role of faculty, tutors, and course structure, Wei, a Chinese student who had been living in the U.S. for 5 years and attended two years of high school in New York City, pointed out the notion of time as a factor contributing to his failure in the course. This is unsurprising given the fact that the course culminates in a timed high-stakes writing exam, but rather than look inward at why time was a problem, students pointed out that it was a constraint that was difficult to overcome. In his narrative essay, he wrote:

The last semester of [Intensive Writing] I failed by a hair and that was a sad story. After the exam, I had self-criticism about why I failed it, and the answer was time is less and I cannot write my third reason with details. So, how can I “create” more time that is very important to pass the exam this semester?

Wei does note that he had “self-criticism” about the failure, yet he still focused on an external factor as the primary reason for his failure. However, when I met Wei for our interview and inquired about his biggest challenge with writing, he explained that vocabulary was his predominant issue, noting, “sometimes I have a lot of idea – it’s Chinese in my head, but I cannot put in English.” He did not mention the issue of time, nor did he make the connection between his lack of English vocabulary and the time constraints of the exam.

6. Discussion

Overall, the student interviews and essays revealed that students frame their obstacles, struggles, and fears as a fluid combination of external and internal factors, many of which stem from prior educational experiences. When asked to discuss their challenges in detail, students rarely attributed their struggles to only one factor, and oftentimes, students were not even fully aware of the reasons for their challenges within a particular class. Tanya demonstrated self-awareness when she spoke of her frustrations that had stemmed from repeating the same course multiple times. She recognized that she had “hit a wall” and that these internal struggles were preventing her from moving forward; however, she was unable to identify the ways in which her writing needed to improve. Similarly, Eva had the awareness to reflect on her anxiety, but she failed to make connections between her learning strategies (i.e. consistently using an electronic translator) and her struggles to improve. Samuel, on the other hand, saw a path to move forward since he was primarily focused on the external factors that had hindered his progress in the past. Yet while he attributed his struggles to a tutor and the teaching methods of a prior instructor, his essay and interview also revealed frustration with his prior education.

Students’ specific attributions for failure primarily focused on their frustration and anxiety that stemmed from prior experiences either with instructors, tutors, or with their own linguistic challenges. Three out of the four students attributed their failure to external factors like a previous professor or tutor, while two of the students felt that it was their own lack of proficiency – and the accompanying anxiety, particularly with a high-stakes exam – that contributed to their struggles in the course. Despite working and having children, none of the students mentioned work or family as factors which contributed to their struggles in class. These findings

differ from Song's (2006), who observed that students frequently emphasized work and family responsibilities as a predominant reason for failure.

All four students in the study are examples of persistence since they remained in the course for a second or third time, and understanding reasons why these students chose to persist – despite repeat failures – would be beneficial for both faculty and administrators. As Cox (2009) argues, instructors need to first understand students' perceptions in order to help them make adjustments. While this may seem obvious to many faculty, the teaching load and large class sizes at many post-secondary institutions can often make this level of communication between professor and student difficult; however, taking the time to understand why students feel they are struggling can be critical in helping that student to succeed. In addition to Samuel's concerns about his interrupted education and a prior negative experience with a tutor, he also expressed anxiety related to a course that relied heavily on technology. Had he addressed these concerns with his professor, the outcome of his prior semester might have been different, and simply highlighting this fact as a part of our discussion helped Samuel to recognize his own perceived reasons for struggling in the class.

Encouraging reflection about both failure and success – either through a writing assignment or a brief discussion—can help ESL students identify to what they attribute successes and failures, resulting in their potential to overcome perceived obstacles. As Lee (2018) points out, listening to L2 student writers can help faculty and administrators better accommodate their needs, rather than developing an ineffective top-down approach to problem-solving (p. 104). In the case of Wei, for example, he primarily was concerned with the issue of a timed exam; however, he failed to make certain connections between his lack of vocabulary and his challenges with the exam itself. Instructors can help students to understand—and even change—these perceptions and attributions, as Gobel and Mori (2007) suggest, “[S]ince we are dealing with attributions, which can be changed, this suggests that teachers may be able to affect the future causal attributions of students, influencing the way students view themselves as learners, how they construct notions of success and failure, and even their view of themselves and their progress in learning a language” (p. 166). Therefore, helping L2 writers to articulate their struggles, while not a panacea, can enable them to look forward and begin to think of themselves not as “failures,” but as students who are continuing to develop as readers and writers in English.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary material related to this article can be found, in the online version, at doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jslw.2018.09.001>.

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