A Special Interview with Paul Kei Matsuda about Second Language Writing

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In this volume of PASAA, we are very honoured to have an opportunity to interview Professor Dr. Paul Kei Matsuda who is Professor of English and the Director of Second Language Writing at Arizona State University, USA. His research centers around second language writing, a transdisciplinary field of inquiry that integrate theoretical and methodological insights from both language studies and writing studies. He is a former president of the American Association for Applied Linguistics and founding chair of the Symposium on Second Language Writing. He has also chaired the CCCC Committee on Second Language Writing and the Nonnative English Speakers in TESOL Caucus. He has edited numerous books and special journal issues on second language writing. His latest publications include books and articles such as *Professionalizing Second Language Writing (2017), Handbook of Second and Foreign Language Writing (2016), Exploring Composition Studies: Sites, Issues, Perspectives (2012)* and "Replication in L2 Writing Research: *Journal of Second Language Writing* Authors' Perceptions." *(2016)* in *TESOL Quarterly.*

Drawing on his wealth of experience in teaching the English language and researching on second language writing, Professor Matsuda shares with us his perspectives on second language

writing, teaching L2 writing, and L2 writing assessment, the area that has gained increasing interest among language practitioners and researchers.

1. **Thank you very much for agreeing to be interviewed for our journal. Before we start, you could perhaps tell us a bit about you and your work. As your origin is Japan, how did you come to be a professor in English in USA? Was there anything inspired you to work on L2 writing?**

Thank you for the opportunity. Yes, I was born and raised in Japan as a monolingual speaker of Japanese until I was about 17 years old, when I decided to learn English on my own. Before that point, I had no special background related to English, and had never lived in an English environment. English was one of my least favorite subjects.

The only exposure to English was the compulsory English classes in junior high school. But I didn't like the way English was being taught as a school subject—through memorization and translation. In fact, when I went to senior high school at the age of 16, I had almost zero proficiency. In the second year of senior high school, I became interested in learning English because I discovered that some of my close friends had learned English when they lived abroad. Being a teenager, I was too embarrassed to use English in front of them, so I decided to learn English privately on my own. To teach myself English, I first read all the books I could find about language learning and teaching, and devised my own self-study curriculum based primarily on frequent reading and writing.

After two years of self-imposed total immersion in the world of English, I had enough proficiency to enter a university in the United States. But I discovered that L2 writing was a neglected subject, and L2 writers were being neglected in college composition classrooms. Writing teachers were not

necessarily prepared to work with L2 writers, and language teachers often didn't know how to teach writing beyond correcting grammar and idiomatic expressions. I felt the need to bring the language world and writing world closer together, so I decided to become an expert in both fields.

2. **Many teachers in our field of ELT are more familiar with teaching L2 writing in the way that they are stick to the grammaticality, coherent structure, and writing for a specific purpose, for instance, academic purpose, which are mostly formal writing, but nowadays some teachers and researchers are turning to pay attention to the idea of starting with free writing, paying less attention to the grammaticality and encouraging creative writing. How do you find this? Is teaching and learning L2 writing in this way better for the ESL/EFL students?**

I think it's a good trend. Traditional ways of teaching writing—focusing on the formal structure—is based on ways of teaching writing that were popular in the 1960s and 70s. Since then, we have learned from research on writing, language and learning that development happens through engagement with meaningful communicative activities. Attention to the structure does facilitate the development, but it's not sufficient. Writing also requires the awareness of the context. It is hard to teach such awareness in a step-by-step, building-block way because the context of writing is complex, but L2 writers already have the ability to understand and manage the complexity in their L1 and in non-academic contexts.

The traditional approach to teaching is easy to manage for teachers—show students the structure, tell them to memorize it, and to reproduce the structure. It's easy to teach and assess, but it leads to meaningless reproduction of the structure, and the ability to do so does not transfer to new

writing situations. It's like teaching students how to cook by showing them a dish and asking them to make something that looks like it. There is a lot more to cooking than that. To learn how to cook, students need not only to look at the food but also to taste it, learn about the ingredients, ways of processing them, and how people react to different tastes, smells, textures, colors and sounds.

Making students reproduce a structure and telling them if it follows the rules or not is not teaching. It's testing. Testing is not teaching. We need to start moving from testing students repeatedly until they get it somehow to actually helping them develop by letting them play with words and sentences, see what they can do with writing, and letting them see how different readers react to their language use. Feedback on the structure should take place in this meaningful context of language play not to enforce some rules but to give tools to help students accomplish what they want to do with language and writing.

Writing and language development takes time. We shouldn't expect the results too soon. Instead, we need to give students a chance to use writing and language in a meaningful context of communication. Informal writing—writing that takes place in non-hierarchical and non-evaluative situations—can create opportunities to build competence before assessing competence.

3. **I love your metaphor of L2 writing practice is like cooking practice. To be honest, I'm not a good cook even though there are many cuisine books that I can buy, but such a book is like a grammar reference or good ground to start with, right? And the idea of providing a chance to students to write in a meaningful context of communication sounds interesting. Can you give an example so that our readers or teachers can apply in their course or class?**

Grammar books and dictionaries can be useful resources—they can raise the awareness of certain features, confirm learners' hypotheses about certain features, or provide providing options in production. But like cooking books, just buying and reading them is not enough for learning how to cook. You have to actually practice cooking. And the biggest difference between grammar books and cooking books is that the former does not provide any information about the process of putting together words and sentences or assembly techniques. That comes with repeated practice with some guidance from an experienced cook or a cooking coach.

In teaching writing to students who are developing their proficiency, the tendency is to break it down into smaller components—words, sentences, paragraphs—and then have students put them together. If we keep doing this, students will never become proficient because the whole is more than the sum of its parts. For beginning students, come up with a realistic writing task that require just a sentence or two. Like writing or revising signs in buildings, birthday cards, and thank you notes. It would also be fun to analyze English texts written on packages for snacks and to revise them. These are realistic tasks that students can relate to, and the structures and functions can be evaluated on the basis of readers' reactions or responses.

The next step is not to write the paragraph—because a paragraph is not a meaningful unit with its internal rules for organization. It's just a visual break. Instead, ask students to write a biographical statement (like the ones that appear in academic journals), abstracts for articles, short instructions for operating classroom equipment like video projectors. By working on these realistic activities, students will learn that becoming good writers is not about learning the patterns because no pattern works in all situations.

Then, gradually, have students attempt more complicated genres like writing book reviews, but focus on the overall effectiveness rather than perfection. Students need to build competence and confidence through a series of manageable and engaging tasks like these.

4. **What do you see as the top three challenges currently facing EFL/ESL teachers when teaching second language writing?**

    Here are my top three based on questions and comments I've often heard from many teachers from around the world: 1) the dearth of professional preparation opportunities; 2) institutional expectations that are out of line with how writing development actually happens; 3) colleagues who are resistant to change.

5. **As a teacher with experience both in the US and other countries in Asia, can you please share with us the trends of second language writing assessment and testing? You know, more and more students nowadays are not only bilingual, but also trilingual or even multilingual, so how can we best assess their writing skill?**

    An important shift that's been happening around the world is that teachers are beginning to understand the difference between standardized writing assessment and classroom writing assessment. The purpose of standardized assessment is summative—to tell students how they are doing in comparison to a particular set of standards. The purpose of classroom assessment is more formative—to tell students where they are, where they could be, and how to get there. That is, we are shifting attention from assessment of learning to assessment for learning and assessment as learning.

Standardized writing assessment tends to focus on the structure because that's something that can be assessed fairly consistently out of context. They tend to focus on what can be assessed and not necessarily on what needs to be assessed. Classroom assessment should focus more on the overall effectiveness and specific achievements as well as areas of possible improvement. It should also move away from just assessing the written text and pay more attention to the development of awareness and intentions and how they are reflected in the written text.

6. **To make a fair or less subjective marking of a piece of writing is another thing that it's quite difficult to handle and that's why we give priority to grammar rules as they are something more tangible to deal with. We normally use double marking system when we have writing examination. And there is always a conflict between two raters for one piece of writing. A native English teacher may find it's difficult to understand what a student wants to communicate and then deduct the points due to the confusing style and organizing ideas whereas a non-native English or Thai teacher can understand it but may deduct a few points on the broken grammar. How do you find this situation?**

There certainly is a tendency to teach what can be taught easily, and to assess what can be assessed reliably, rather than focusing on what students actually need. If you really think about it, neither fluency nor accuracy is sufficient. What is most important is the overall effectiveness.

When we use punitive or point-deduction grading, and when we do not specify the criteria *a priori*, we often end up punishing students for what we didn't teach or what cannot be learned with the time and resources available to them. That's unreasonable and unfair. For ongoing classroom

assessment, the goal should not be to punish students for what they can't do but to recognize what they can do, what they have learned, and to identify what they need to learn next. To be fair and consistent, it is important to identify specific learning objectives and establish criteria, and communicate those criteria to teachers, raters, and students in the form of rubrics. What students produce is not going to be perfect. But if they demonstrate adequate development in specific areas, that should be good enough.

7. **Are there any controversial issues or research gaps in this area that need further research? Your suggestions can be definitely beneficial to young researchers or even new comers in this area.**

Yes, there are a few controversies in the field of second language writing. The most obvious one is the role of language teaching in the writing classroom. Language development is part of writing development, but in some cases, it is overshadowing writing development—some writing courses are designed as grammar courses in disguise. L2 writing researchers have been debating whether and to what extent we should focus on language development and corrective feedback.

Another controversy is the role of multimodal composition in L2 writing instruction. Some researchers argue that it provides a meaningful context for writing while allowing students to draw on their own interests and strengths. Others, however, feel that it is taking time and resources away from the learning of more traditional forms of academic writing. This tension is also related to the teaching of informal writing as well as the recognition of the dynamic nature of language and writing—as seen in the discussion of English as an international language and translingual writing.

Until fairly recently, I was feeling a bit bored with L2 writing research because the discussion seemed stagnated. But now I'm getting excited again because I see the need for more research to help expand the scope of L2 writing beyond just teaching a narrow set of structures and conventions. In other words, these tensions seem to indicate, on the one hand, the reaffirmation of the importance of what the field has traditionally been focusing on and, on the other hand, the recognition of the possibility for re-envisioning L2 writing to be something that permeates our lives in various ways.

The Interviewer

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