Considerations for Supporting International & Multilingual Writers

Cultural norms and expectations vary.
U.S. readers tend to prefer clear, concise writing with evidence that supports an explicit thesis, hypothesis, or research question. Some cultures consider this style too direct, simplistic, or even boring. If an international student's writing seems convoluted or indirect, it does not necessarily reflect a lack of understanding but perhaps a cultural preference for a more digressive rhetorical style. Before penalizing for style, consider how long students have been writing in the United States. If they are fairly new to the U.S. academic system, they may not yet be fully aware of the writing conventions and the expectations of their readers; in such cases, formative feedback may be more appropriate than a negative evaluation.

Writing is more than usage and mechanics.
When commenting on a multilingual student's written work, it is important to consider the whole piece, not only linguistic accuracy. While correct spelling and grammar do contribute to clarity, writers demonstrate what they know primarily through their ideas, organization, and use of evidence. Considering these factors in aggregate acknowledges the larger purpose of academic writing and provides you, as a reader, with a complete picture of the writer's knowledge and skills. This approach recognizes language learners' ideas in equal measure with their language use.

Not all errors are equal.
When evaluating linguistic accuracy, it is important to distinguish between global and local errors. Targeted, prioritized comments or corrections can help writers to receive and process feedback. Ask yourself: does this error cause confusion and misunderstanding, or is it simply recognizable as an error? If you are unsure what the writer means, this is problematic and should be addressed accordingly. If you notice an error but understand the writer's idea, this is less important and may not always warrant a correction.

- **Global errors interfere with comprehensibility.** This type of error often relates to content, but it can include grammar. For example, an incorrectly used conjunction is a higher-order concern if it demonstrates an inaccurate relationship between ideas in consecutive clauses. Additionally, a sentence fragment is a higher-order concern if it results in an idea being incomplete. In each case, the writer is not successfully communicating their ideas.

- **Local errors do not impede understanding.** This type of error usually includes spelling, mechanics, and grammar. For instance, a missing modifier is often a lower-order concern because it usually does not change the meaning of a sentence. In addition, an unusual or awkward word choice is a lower-order concern if it does not cause confusion. Though such errors can be distracting, they do not reflect a writer's lack of understanding or cause a reader's misunderstanding of the subject.

For questions about this and other English language resources at Brown, contact ellwriting@brown.edu