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# English as a Second Language: Writing Challenges, Self-Assessment, and Interest in for-Credit ESL Courses at Southeastern University

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English as a Second Language: Writing Challenges, Self-Assessment, and Interest in for-Credit  
ESL Courses at Southeastern University

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Honors Thesis

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Whether Chinese, French, Swahili, Hindi, or English, learning a language requires time and dedication. One of the more challenging languages to learn is English, yet English is becoming more prevalent around the globe. According to a statement by Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL), English is now “the most widely taught language in the world” (“Position Statement on English as a Global Language”). Many individuals are striving not only to learn English but also to master it. These individuals include businessmen, doctors, politicians, scholars, athletes, and students. As English is swiftly becoming the international *lingua franca*, students especially are recognizing the importance of English fluency. To help them on their language journey, researchers are working to identify specific areas that consistently challenge non-native speakers. Once properly identified, these areas may receive more attention in English as a second language (ESL) classes and other learning materials.

These materials are especially needed at the collegiate level. As increasing numbers of American students look to study abroad for portions of their university educations, more foreign students are also looking to study in the United States. A *USA Today* article found that in 2012 international student enrollment at American universities reached 764,495 students, a 6% increase from 2011 (Tempera). These factors signal the growing need for effective ESL programs that teach English basics and the finer points of English writing conventions so that these students can succeed at the American university level and beyond. At universities, students’ English communication skills touch not only researchers and English professors but

also professors in many, if not all, disciplines. While English professors work directly with students regarding their English writing development, professors in other disciplines require papers, projects, written assignments, speeches, and presentations that require good communication skills in English. When students are able to communicate properly in English, the effect is felt throughout the university.

Mastering written English presents a unique set of communicative challenges to the non-native speaker. For example, writing requires the student to produce complete sentences rather than the fragmented phrases used in speech. Homophones and closely-related words such as *produce* and *create* or *alone* and *lone*, subject-verb agreement, article usage, and dependent clauses represent a few of the complexities of written English that intimidate ESL students.

For international students who wish to study at American universities, the ability to write well in English is essential to their educational success. For this reason, the English abilities of these students should be important to schools' leadership teams, whether at large universities or small private colleges. While a large university may benefit from studies and surveys done with international students who all speak the same language (for instance, all of the Spanish-speaking students or all of the Creole-speaking students), small schools may not have enough language-specific students to make a specialized study beneficial. With over three thousand current undergraduate and graduate students, including international students from more than twenty countries, Southeastern University must service the English language needs of a diverse population of ESL students. Research that seeks to identify and address the English language needs of Southeastern's non-native English speakers not only benefits the university's current ESL students but illuminates ways the university might better engage the international community in marketing its academic programs abroad.

One approach for strengthening the academic performance of international students (thereby boosting Southeastern retention rates and overseas marketability) is to offer one credit hour English language support classes for those students who might need help. Before adding ESL courses, however, leadership and faculty should determine whether there is adequate demand and in what areas of language need that demand is greatest: writing, speaking, or reading. Because of the dramatic effect that written performance may have on students' success, investigators should pay particular attention to how students' view their own writing abilities and how this might influence their interest in taking ESL writing courses. Three questions are important in accomplishing these goals:

1. At what level do the students rate their current English ability? Although students' self-assessments may not be accurate assessments of actual language proficiency as measured by standardized tests, their perception of their own English skills may influence their interest in college ESL courses.

2. Do they believe that written proficiency in English will be important to their future success? If they believe that they will need English to be successful in their future careers or vocations, they may be more committed to improving English proficiency while at Southeastern.

3. Do the students create a demand for future for-credit ESL writing courses at Southeastern University? If the students create a high enough demand for ESL writing courses, Southeastern University may want to consider adding for-credit courses to accommodate their needs. If the demand is low, leadership may choose to wait until the demand grows or international student enrollment increases.

## II. REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

The Southeastern University student body includes individuals from a wide range of

countries, cultures, and languages. To reflect the large number of Spanish-speaking students at the university, in this review I have placed particular emphasis on studies regarding Spanish-speaking individuals and the challenges they face in producing original written English. The majority of the sources deal with individuals at the undergraduate and scholarly levels. These sources reflect not only the challenges faced by our current undergraduate students but also the challenges they will face in the future as professionals. Throughout this review, the terms “writer” and “speaker” are used interchangeably. The articles and studies under review deal almost exclusively with written data.

Writing in English, as opposed to reading, listening, or speaking, poses a particular challenge for non-native English speakers. These challenges range from translation quandaries to writing dilemmas faced at the pre-university, university, and scholarly levels. For example, Hinkel in a 2004 study published in *Language Teaching Research* noted the differences between native and non-native speaker usage of verbs. The majority of the non-native speakers employed the past tense much more often than did the native speakers. The Chinese and Indonesian students used the future tense much more than the English students, while the Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, and Arabic students used it much less. Less than fifty percent of the essays contained perfect or progressive tenses, some opting to use the past tense instead of these more challenging tenses. Only a few of usage differences in verb tense and voice emerged, the first of many challenges encountered by non-native English speakers when writing in English.

Various registers are available to researchers who wish to analyze students’ and scholars’ writings. (Registers contain compositions or speeches related to a certain topic, such as medicine or business management. Each register contains writings by only one group of people, such as only scholars or only students.) Biber, Davies, Jones, and Tracy-Ventura evaluated multiple

Spanish registers from the Corpus del Español. After analyzing the data results, they found that the written registers contained a larger number of dense, informational structures than the spoken registers. Because of the density of written structures, writing presents a number of challenges that can often be avoided when speaking. I believe that these challenges hold true across all languages, though the language structures involved may be different.

### *Translation Challenges*

Some writing challenges arise from multiple translation possibilities for a single word. Rabadán published a study in 2011 in the *Linguistica Pragmática* that analyzed the differences between the English word *any* and one of its Spanish counterparts, *cualquier(a)*, in works translated from English to Spanish. She found that *any* in English may carry a positive or negative connotation; the Spanish *cualquier(a)*, however, does not maintain the connotation when the English works are translated. Rabadán also noted that *any* can actually be translated not only as *cualquier(a)*, but also as *ningún/a/o/as/os*, *algún/a/o/as/os*, or *todo(a)*. These differences in Spanish can lead to translation errors of *any* and its connotations. Coincidentally, because the Spanish options also have multiple translations, incorrect translation into English may cause misunderstanding or cloud clarity in compositions, term papers, and scholarly articles.

Labrador conducted a corpus-based contrastive study to analyze the usage of the English restrictive adjectives and adverbs *just*, *only*, *sole/solely*, *alone*, *unique/uniquely*, *exclusive/exclusively*, and *single/singly* versus the usage of their common counterparts in original Spanish: *sólo*, *solo/a/os/as*, *solamente*, *único/a/os/as*, *únicamente*, *exclusivo/a/os/as*, and *exclusivamente*. In a study published in *Languages in Contrast: International Journal for Contrastive Linguistics*, Labrador points out that some of the English terms have multiple Spanish equivalents. For example, *only* can be translated as *solo/a/os/as* (as in “only bread”), as

*único/a/os/as* (as in “his only son”), or in a number of other ways. Her study found that in English the restrictive adjectives are used more frequently than the restrictive adverbs but that in Spanish the individual restrictive adjectives and adverbs vary in usage frequency. Translators, students, and scholars, therefore, should be careful in choosing the correct comparable term when translating from English to Spanish and vice-versa.

An additional area of Spanish-English challenge lies in the English use of *-ly* adverbs versus the Spanish use of *-mente* adverbs. Spanish *-mente* adverbs are often the cognates and presumed Spanish counterparts of English *-ly* adverbs. In an article published in *Target: International Journal on Translation Studies* in 2008, Ramón and Labrador describe the various ways in which English *-ly* adverbs can be translated into Spanish using non- *-mente* adverbs (*nearly—casi*), prepositional phrases (*deeply—a fondo*), modulation (*largely illusory—no fueran reales*), omission (*blushed deeply—sonrojé*), verbs (*opened slightly—se entreabrió*), adjectives (*awfully tactless—una horrible falta de tacto*), and nouns (*mostly—la mayoría*), or can be omitted altogether. They studied the frequency of eight Spanish “*-mente*” adverbs—*absolutamente, ampliamente, completamente, extremadamente, prácticamente, profundamente, relativamente, and totalmente*—and found that works translated into Spanish used the *-mente* adverbs more often, and in some cases much more often, than did original Spanish works. They call this overuse of the “*-mente*” adverbs “translationese.” This finding also begs the question of whether translation of *-mente* adverbs from Spanish to English also results in an overabundance of *-ly* adverbs in translated writings.

#### *Pre-University Level Challenges*

Translating works, however, is quite different from writing original works in English, and Spanish speakers’ difficulties with English may range with their level of English study. Problems

encountered by pre-university students are different from those faced by university students and professional scholars. Kelley and Kohnert conducted a study of thirty typically developing (as opposed to learning impaired) Spanish-speaking English language students between the ages of eight and thirteen from a city in the upper Midwest. The researchers tested the students for their level of cross-linguistic cognate identification in the areas of expressive and receptive vocabulary. (Cognates are words that have similar spellings in both the first language and the second language, for instance, English *astronomy* and Spanish *astronomía*.) The study's results indicated that typically developing students who speak Spanish and are learning English at this age may use cognates to assist themselves in learning English (199-200). The other side of this finding may be that non-cognates pose dilemmas for these students.

At the pre-university level, Díez-Bedmar conducted a study to determine the errors made by Spanish students writing English compositions for the University Entrance Examination (UEE) for the University of Jaén (Spain). Díez-Bedmar found that the students had the most difficulty with verbs and the least difficulty with nouns, while adjectives were mid-difficulty. Within the verbs, main verbs were more challenging than modal auxiliary verbs. After dividing all of the students' errors into eight categories (form, grammar, lexis, punctuation, register, style, word, and lexico-grammar), Díez-Bedmar discovered that the students made more errors in grammar, lexis, and form than in the other categories (148). Comparing the results of her study with the results from studies by Crespo García (in 1999) and Rodríguez Aguado (in 2004), Díez-Bedmar concludes that Spanish students at this level have trouble with (1) main verbs (more often than with modal auxiliary verbs), (2) third person singular verb forms, (3) plural adjectives, and (4) numeric expressions of nouns. (153). These findings reveal that Spanish students' difficulties with English are not restricted to one single grammatical or syntactical area.

*University Level Challenges*

Researchers seem particularly interested in Spanish students' English abilities at the university level. Noting that correct usage of English prepositions is often a challenge for non-native speakers, Gonzalez-Álvarez and Doval-Suárez conducted a study evaluating Spanish university students' usage of *at* in comparison to that of native speakers and published the results in the *Linguistics Journal*. They found that the Spanish students used *at* less than the native English students, at a frequency that was almost statistically significant. The Spanish students significantly overused *at* to refer to time but underused its reference to space. Three phrases—"at the end," "at the same time," and "at the beginning"—constituted 53.47% of the time examples in the Spanish student data in contrast to only 27.88% in the native English data. Gonzalez-Álvarez and Doval-Suárez note, however, that these expressions are somewhat idiomatic and may cause the time category to be overrepresented in the Spanish data (118). Nonetheless, since the Spanish students' overall usage of *at* was similar to that of native English students, Gonzalez-Álvarez and Doval-Suarez concluded that the advanced Spanish students and native English students had nearly the same proficiency with this preposition (120).

A study conducted by Moreno Jaén with second-year Spanish university students sought to determine the students' English collocation abilities. Collocations are groups of words that are frequently found together in a language, such as "safe place" and "sound argument." Collocations are often challenging because non-native speakers tend to learn words individually rather than as "chunks" or phrases. This learning method leaves them vulnerable to language transference (transferring a phrase structure from the first language to the second language), often leading them to grammatically correct but natively incorrect phrases, such as "to finish a war" instead of "to end a war" (130). In an article in the *International Journal of English Studies*,

Moreno Jaén reports that the students as a whole had a very limited knowledge of English collocations, and none scored high enough to pass the study's collocation test.

Rica Peromingo obtained similar results in a study of multiword units, an area related to collocations. In a corpus-based study published in *Linguistics & the Human Sciences*, he reports his finding that, in contrast to previous studies by other researchers, Spanish speakers overused English multiword and phraseological units; many of the phraseological units used were similar to comparable structures in Spanish (334). Further research, however, is necessary to determine whether Spanish speakers truly *overuse* or *underuse* English multiword units, so that suitable ESL instruction can be provided.

Another area of difficulty, similar to collocations and multiword units, involves English complex noun phrases, as described by Carrió Pastor in an study in the *Revista Española de Lingüística Aplicada*. Complex noun phrases (CNPs) are nouns with surrounding modifiers that have been condensed into a compact phrase, for example, “21 consecutive adult cardiac allograft recipients” (29). English writers create CNPs by eliminating prepositional/adjectival/other clauses that directly connect the descriptive words to the “head” noun. Complicated CNPs sometimes cause confusion for the reader, especially if he/she is a non-native speaker. For example, should “clonal plasma cells” be interpreted as “clonal cells of plasma” or “cells of clonal plasma” (30)? CNPs are not common in Spanish because Spanish does not (and often cannot) eliminate the connecting prepositional/adjectival/other phrases that join the descriptive words to the head noun. In her study of pre-modified CNPs (that is, CNPs in which the descriptive words come before the head noun), Carrió Pastor found that Spanish students at the upper intermediate level of English learning (with the help of five specialists) found over twenty-six different translation options for the five- to seven-element pre-modified CNPs identified in

the study (35). These results indicated that the Spanish students had difficulty in identifying the head noun in the phrase, an obstacle that could hinder them in writing effective English.

A particular verb-like dilemma facing Spanish students is the usage of gerunds versus infinitives. Martinez-Garcia and Wulff noted in a study in the *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* that while ESL students may use certain *grammatically* correct verb constructions, they sometimes do not produce *idiomatically* correct constructions. In other words, the ESL students may not write using the same constructions that native speakers choose, for example, “Maria began to feed the squirrels” versus “Maria began feeding the squirrels” (226). In their study, Martinez-Garcia and Wulff found that the Spanish speakers generally chose the native speaker semantic constructions, but not in specific cases, especially with the verbs *tend*, *manage*, *wish*, and *intend*. The Spanish speakers showed a preference for infinitival constructions with the verb *begin*, contrary to the native speaker preference for *begin* gerundial constructions. Martinez-Garcia and Wulff concluded that the Spanish students might tend to overgeneralize certain grammar techniques and transfer certain constructions from Spanish to English.

Verb constructions may cause as many difficulties as verb forms do. Luzón Marco studied Spanish students’ use of atypical verb+noun combinations in English technical writing, particularly in the engineering field. After analyzing data regarding students’ use of *achieve*, *cause*, *do*, *explain*, *generate*, *give*, *have*, *produce*, and *make*, Luzón concluded that the Spanish students did not recognize the negative connotation of *cause* and the positive connotation of *produce*. They also used certain verbs, such as *generate*, where native speakers chose other verbs, such as *pose*, *involve*, or *present*. The Spanish students demonstrated some confusion over the use of “to do” versus “to make,” perhaps because the Spanish verb *hacer* encompasses both “to do” and “to make.” Luzón Marco notes that these results regarding *make/do* reinforce the

observation that non-native English speakers tend toward “the open choice principle” (collecting individual words into a phrase) rather than the “idiom principle” (using pre-constructed native speaker idioms) (89). This tendency was also found in the aforementioned study by Moreno Jaén.

Palacios-Martínez and Martínez-Insua studied Spanish university students’ usage of existential *there*. Existential *there* is a filler word that enables the writer (or speaker) to place the sentence subject later in the sentence, for example, “There were a lot of guests at the royal wedding” (214). In a study published in the *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, Palacios-Martínez and Martínez-Insua reported their finding that Spanish students used existential *there* constructions more frequently than native speakers (about 39 vs. 24 per 10,000 words), but they did not use as many different verbs as native speakers and sometimes encountered difficulty in choosing the correct singular or plural verb form (218-229, 225). Palacios-Martínez and Martínez-Insua theorized that this confusion in choosing verbs and verb forms might be the result of inaccurate language transfer of the Spanish verb *haber* (used in a similar manner as existential *there*), the complexity and placement of the *there* constructions, the learning level of the non-native speakers (intermediate versus advanced), or limited understanding of the subject-verb agreement rule. In particular, the subject-verb agreement discord could be the result of troublesome nouns, such as *people*, *few*, *plenty*, and *any*. The discord was especially apparent in negative constructions, for example, “but this doesn’t mean that there aren’t place for dreams” (225). The results from this study illustrate that what native speakers may consider a simple sentence construction can pose a substantial challenge to non-native English learners.

Related to existential *there* is the *it*-cleft, a construction studied by Doval Suárez and

González Álvarez. *It*-clefts are sentences that begin with *it* followed by a verb and a dependent clause, such as, “It was at this time that they started to have serious economic problems” (154). The English language prefers a subject-verb-object sentence pattern, even utilizing dummy subjects (*it/there*), the passive voice, and clefting to maintain the format. Spanish, however, is much more flexible in its word-order options, eliminating the need for dummy subjects and sometimes the stated subject altogether. Doval Suárez and González Álvarez discovered that the Spanish university students used fewer *it*-clefts in general, and the *it*-clefts they did use were less complex than those written by native English students (160, 165). The Spanish students’ avoidance of complex *it*-clefts may arise from a preference for the safer subject-verb-object constructions, since Spanish does not have a syntactical construction comparable to *it*-cleft sentences.

In another study, González Álvarez and Doval Suárez chose to evaluate Spanish university students’ abilities with the English construction *take*+noun, which the researchers considered to be a collocation more often than an idiom. (The researchers defined collocations as sequences with unrestricted nouns accompanied by restricted verbs, as in “take a picture,” [57].) González Álvarez and Doval Suárez found that, in comparison to English students, Spanish students generally selected the incorrect verb and/or noun, confused the meaning of the phrase, or used an incorrect pre- or post-modifying word. The Spanish students used *take*+noun combinations less frequently as collocations and free combinations but more frequently as idioms than did the English students (61). Although the non-native speakers used the same variety of collocation patterns as native speakers, they tended to underuse certain native speaker collocations, perhaps by substituting another verb for *take* or by using a different semantic construction.

In writing argumentative papers, lexical and modal verbs are key to communicating opinions and findings. In an article in the *International Journal of English Studies*, Salazar and Verdaguer discussed their study regarding Spanish students' use of lexical verbs and modality in argumentative writings. They found that both the American and the Spanish students used *feel*, *seem*, and *think* much more often than other lexical verbs. The Spanish students, however, favored *think* in particular and frequently used *feel*, *believe*, *show*, *claim*, *find*, and *appear* in their literal meanings rather than in their abstract or modal meanings. Regarding *feel* in particular, Salazar and Verdaguer concluded that the non-native speakers might not have had adequate understanding of the abstract/figurative meaning of *feel* and therefore used it more commonly in its literal sense (216).

These studies by no means cover all of the challenges faced by Spanish university students in producing written English, but they do provide a good starting point for further investigation.

### *Scholarly Level Challenges*

English writing challenges do not end at the university level. These dilemmas also stretch into the scholarly sphere. Because English has become a primary language for significant research articles, increasing numbers of non-native English-speaking scholars are reporting their findings in English. According to Mur-Dueñas, “English has now become *the* language of scholarly publication. English publications – most notably, research articles (RAs) – enable scholars to make their research available to a large audience and, what is also very relevant, they enable scholars to establish their credentials, get promotions, and, overall, be considered successful academics” (italics in original, 117-118). This group of well-educated non-native English scholars face disparate, yet more specific, dilemmas than do the university students.

Mur-Dueñas studied the variances between native English scholars' and Spanish scholars' usage of topicalisers in English scholarly writing. Topicalisers are sentence-beginning words that indicate a change or progression in a topic or that signal a summary/restatement of a previous topic, such as, "with respect to," "as for," "concerning," etc. Mur-Dueñas found in her study that Spanish scholars have a high tendency to transfer topicalisers from their native Spanish into English. In fact, the Spanish scholars used topicalisers twice as much in their English articles and four times as much in their Spanish articles than did native English scholars in their English articles. These numbers represent a wide divergence in the use of topicalisers between the Spanish scholarly writings (in Spanish and in English) and the native English scholarly writings.

Spanish scholars also encounter difficulty in communicating their research findings using the same authorial voice as native English scholars. In an article published in *Corpora*, Lorés Sanz presented the results from her study on language transference in the writings of Spanish-speaking business management scholars. She found that the Spanish writers used the exclusive *we+verb* (which includes only the writer, not the readers) construction with modal verbs more frequently than did their English peers; the Spanish scholars used the modal verbs to moderate the authoritative voice in their research articles (18-19). This tendency may cause the Spanish scholars' writings to sound less authoritative and the studies' conclusions to seem more like observations or suggestions.

Vázquez Orta conducted a similar study regarding Spanish speaker use of modal auxiliary verbs to express stance in English business management research articles. He found that although the Spanish scholars used *may* to almost the same extent as native speakers, they were more likely to use *can* erroneously in place of *may* or *could*. Also, the low frequency of

*might* led Vázquez Orta to suggest that the Spanish speakers might not have fully understood the nuances associated with individual modal verbs. Overall, the Spanish scholars used modal auxiliary verbs less than the English scholars, who used *may*, *would*, *can*, *might*, and *could* to hedge their statements more often than did the Spanish scholars (88). This finding suggests that native speakers are more explicitly cautious in presenting their stances, a direct contrast to the aforementioned results of Lorés Sanz. More studies, therefore, are required to determine the true tendencies of Spanish and English scholars in using the authoritative voice in English.

### III. SURVEY DESIGN AND HYPOTHESIS

In light of the extensive needs of non-native students, ESL students at Southeastern University were surveyed regarding their perceptions, felt needs, and interest in English language support at Southeastern University. A survey dealing exclusively with Spanish speakers may have provided particular insights into this notable percentage of the student body. However, given the potential for improving retention rates of non-native English speakers and more effective marketing strategies for cross cultural contexts, a survey targeting as many ESL students on campus as possible seemed more practical and relevant. Additionally, comparing self-assessed levels of English fluency and writing abilities with levels of interest in potential for-credit ESL college courses would be valuable in determining whether a sufficient demand for these courses exists. To this end, an appropriate survey that centered on the three main research questions was designed and administered:

1. At what levels do non-native students rate their current English proficiency?
2. Do they believe that writing in English will be important in their futures?
3. Does student interest constitute a demand for potential for-credit ESL writing courses at Southeastern University?

The survey was open to current Southeastern students who were over eighteen years old and who do not speak English as their first language. These students were invited via email to take the online survey. Ultimately, fifteen eligible students chose to participate, twelve of whom completed the entire survey. This sample contained students who spoke one or more languages in addition to English. The students participated without monetary or other tangible reward. The survey consisted of forty questions which gathered demographical information, assessed self-reported English proficiency levels, and indicated interest in potential one-credit hour ESL college courses. The survey was conducted following guidelines set by the Institutional Review Board, and a copy of the survey instrument can be found in Appendix A.

It was hypothesized that those students with a self-assessed higher level of English ability would show more interest in potential for-credit college ESL writing courses than those with lower self-assessed English ability. Students with a higher self-assessed English proficiency level would presumably have more confidence in their English skills and consequently more eager and enthusiastic for opportunities for improvement.

#### IV. SURVEY RESULTS

Of the survey recipients, fifteen students who were eligible under the survey requirements chose to participate. Two, however, did not proceed past the demographical questions, and one stopped after completing almost three-fourths of the survey. The survey results are based on the twelve participants who completed the entire survey. Eleven were between the ages of 18-26, and one participant was in the 27-35 year-old age range. Seven were female, and five were male. Seven marked themselves as Hispanic. When asked what language they spoke, participants were allowed to select more than one. One student marked Creole, two marked French, two marked Korean, three marked Portuguese, seven marked Spanish, and one

marked “Other.” For languages spoken at home (only one selection possible), two marked French, two marked Korean, one marked Portuguese, six marked Spanish, and one marked “Other.” These results are summarized in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1. Respondent First Language

<b>Language</b>	<b>Spoken by Participant (Multiple responses possible)</b>	<b>Spoken at Home (One response possible)</b>
Creole	1	0
French	2	2
Korean	2	2
Portuguese	3	1
Spanish	7	6
Other	1	1

The next area of interest involved participants’ self-evaluated levels of overall English proficiency and their proficiency in writing. Students were asked to rate themselves on a scale of 1-5, with 1 being low overall proficiency, 3 being intermediate, and 5 being high. The majority of respondents assessed themselves at intermediate to high levels in both categories (see Table 1.2).

Table 1.2. Self-Assessment: Overall English Proficiency and Written English Proficiency

<b>Self-Rating</b>	<b>1 Low</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3 Intermediate</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5 High</b>
Overall Proficiency	0%	0%	33%	58%	8%
Writing	0%	8%	42%	42%	8%

Those with the highest self-rated levels (4-5) of overall English proficiency and English writing ability also indicated that they were the most committed to improving their skills in writing English. Those who scored themselves as intermediate (3) in overall proficiency and writing, however, showed lower levels of commitment towards bettering their English writing skills. Also, 67% of those with the highest self-ranked commitment to improvement marked “Very likely” regarding likelihood to enroll in potential one-credit hour elective ESL courses.

All participants believed that they might use written English after graduation, particularly in the areas of job/career and graduate education. No significant difference, however, was noted between the importance of written English in their future careers and their likelihood to enroll in a one-credit hour course.

Students were also asked to rate their current proficiency in specific writing areas on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high). Almost all of the students ranked themselves at or above the intermediate proficiency level (3) in all six areas—grammar, spelling, vocabulary, sentence formation, thought-development, and cohesiveness. Except in vocabulary, all participants assessed themselves at the intermediate to high levels (see Table 1.3).

Table 1.3. Southeastern ESL Student Self-Assessed Proficiency Level

	<b>1 Low</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5 High</b>
Grammar	0%	0%	33%	58%	8%
Spelling	0%	0%	25%	58%	17%
Vocabulary	0%	8%	42%	42%	8%
Sentence Formation	0%	0%	42%	50%	8%
Thought-development	0%	0%	33%	50%	17%
Cohesiveness	0%	0%	25%	50%	25%

While college courses are designed to strengthen students' knowledge in various areas of study, non-native English speakers face challenges that their peers may not. For this reason, the survey asked the students to indicate whether they felt that their current college classes were "improving, weakening, or having no affect [*sic*] on [their] ability to write English." Thirty-three percent to fifty percent found that their courses were improving their abilities in each of the six categories. Surprisingly, one participant reported that his/her courses were actually weakening his/her English writing abilities (see Table 1.4).

Table 1.4. Effect of Current College Enrollment on Proficiency in Written English

	<b>1 Weakening</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3 No effect</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5 Improving</b>
Grammar	0%	8%	8%	42%	42%
Spelling	0%	8%	17%	33%	42%
Vocabulary	0%	8%	17%	33%	42%
Sentence Formation	0%	8%	25%	33%	33%
Thought-development	0%	8%	8%	50%	33%
Cohesiveness	0%	8%	0%	58%	33%

Further investigation is needed to clarify why some students feel that their courses are having no effect or even weakening their abilities to write in English.

Through the Academic Center for Enrichment (ACE), all students at Southeastern University have access to assignment assistance, and most students are required to take ENGL 1033 College Reading and Writing. To determine how these resources are helping students, the survey included a number of questions regarding participants' use of these opportunities. With respect to ACE, 42% of participants reported that they had never requested help with written

English through ACE, and 25% reported going a few times a semester. An additional 25% went two to three times a month, and 8% went 1+ times a week. In regard to ENGL 1033 College Reading and Writing, 50% found it to be helpful, and 42% marked the question as “Not Applicable.” All indicated that they would be likely or very likely to enroll in at least one one-credit hour elective English writing course.

One of the most important aspects of this survey regarded student interest in for-credit ESL writing courses. All participants except one indicated interest in taking an English writing course, and half showed interest in an English speaking/listening course. Four were interested in an English vocabulary course. When asked “If Southeastern University offered one-credit hour elective English writing classes for English-language learners, how likely are you to enroll in one?” 50% responded “Very likely,” and 50% responded “Likely.” Additionally, five indicated that they would likely enroll in one course (one semester), three would enroll in two courses (two semesters in a row), one would enroll in three courses (three semesters in a row), and three would enroll in four or more courses (four or more semesters in a row). This show of interest could be beneficial in helping leadership and faculty in deciding whether to include ESL courses as electives for non-native English speakers.

## V. DISCUSSION

The results of this survey lead in several thought-provoking directions, although the sample size is too small ( $n=12$ ) to make statistically significant generalizations. More definitive observations may have possible had the sample size been greater. However, the results from this sample do indicate that further investigations may be productive. Since many of the questions were designed for self-analysis, the participants’ assessments of their own English abilities may not reflect their actual levels as measured by standardized English language proficiency tests

such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Admittedly, as stated by Gonzalez, “there is the potential for bias in the self-reporting of English ability, although the direction and extent of the biases are not known” (260). Self-assessments, however, are valuable for accessing a student’s perception of his or her own abilities and how that perception may influence choices and interests. While self-assessments may be skewed in a student’s favor, the opposite may also be true. A study involving self-, peer-, and teacher-assessments of student writings in a Japanese English as a foreign language (EFL) class found that “many self-raters assessed their own writings lower than predicted. This was particularly true for high-achieving students” (Matsuno 75). While this survey did not measure learners’ accuracy in self-assessment, it did investigate the link between students’ self-perception of ability and interest in for-credit ESL courses.

My first research question was “At what levels do non-native students rate their current English proficiency?” My survey found that the majority of participants rated themselves at intermediate to high levels in overall English proficiency. If the sampling is representative of all international students at Southeastern University, it may be reasonable to say that the majority of these students have at least adequate English communication skills for everyday interactions. However, 33% of participants ranked themselves at intermediate and 58% between intermediate and high levels of English language proficiency, indicating potentially high demand for ESL courses.

When compared, self-assessed English writing levels were lower than self-assessed overall proficiency levels. Forty-two percent of participants ranked themselves as intermediate, and an additional forty-two percent as between intermediate and high. In the specific writing areas of grammar, spelling, vocabulary, sentence formation, thought-development, and cohesiveness, all participants ranked themselves at the intermediate to high levels, except for one

who assessed himself/herself as below the intermediate level in vocabulary. Few, however, ranked themselves at the high level in any of the categories. These results, even more so than the overall proficiency results, suggest a great need for courses designed especially for ESL students to improve their writing abilities.

The responses to one particular question deserve special note. The survey asked participants to evaluate whether their current course offerings were improving, weakening, or having no effect upon their abilities to write in English using the same six writing area as before—grammar, spelling, vocabulary, sentence formation, thought development, and cohesiveness. Since college courses are assumed to promote student learning and certainly provide non-native English speakers opportunity for practice, it would be expected that all respondents would indicate some degree of improvement in written English. In confirmation of this viewpoint, six of the participants found that their courses are improving their English writing abilities in these areas. Five indicated that their courses were helping in some areas but having no affect in others. One of participants reported that his or her courses are actually weakening his or her abilities. Although the majority are experiencing benefits from their classes, these negative perceptions certainly suggest further research on the role of academic courses in improving English language proficiency is needed.

My second research question asked if ESL students believe that writing in English will be important in their futures. On a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), six marked 5, two marked 4, and four marked 3. A similar question listed a number of contexts in which students may use written English after graduation. Multiple responses were possible. All but one of the participants marked job/career and ten marked graduate education. Five believed they would use English in a family context, and five for community involvement. Three saw themselves using written

English in a ministry context. These numbers indicate that these college students value the ability to communicate in written English as important to their future success. In light of these responses, offering for-credit ESL college courses would appear beneficial and valued by Southeastern's non-native English speaking community, preparing them to experience greater success in their future careers, interactions, opportunities, and relationships.

My final research question regarded student demand for potential one-credit ESL writing courses at Southeastern University. To evaluate possible demand, I included two questions dealing with likelihood of enrollment. The first question asked, "If Southeastern University offered one-credit hour elective English classes for English-language learners, how likely are you to enroll in one?" The response choices were "Very likely," "Likely," and "Not likely." Fifty percent of the students responded "Very likely," and fifty percent responded "Likely." If the student sampling accurately represents all ESL learners at Southeastern University, the interest in for-credit ESL courses is considerable.

Is there enough interest, however, for ESL courses every semester? A follow-up question asked students how often they would be likely to enroll, with the choices ranging from 1 course (just one semester) to 4+ courses (four or more semesters in a row). Five students stated that they would enroll in just one course, three in two courses, one in three courses, and three in four or more courses. If these results were found to characterize a statistically-significant sample, introducing ESL writing courses at Southeastern University would enjoy a high initial enrollment followed by a decline to lower sustainable levels of enrollment. Further research is necessary before ESL courses are introduced to course offerings.

As stated previously, it was hypothesized that those with a self-assessed higher level of English ability would show more interest in potential for-credit college ESL writing courses than

those with lower self-assessed English ability. Those with a higher self-assessed English proficiency level were reasoned to have more confidence in their English skills and would, therefore, be more willing to seek improvement. This hypothesis was partially supported by the results of a study in which Hsieh found that students with a higher self-efficacy had “significantly higher interest in learning the foreign language . . . [and] a more positive attitude about learning the foreign language” (84).

This survey’s results partially confirmed this hypothesis, but not entirely. All of the participants who rated themselves at level 5 in English proficiency responded “Likely” to enroll, but none marked “Very likely.” Of those at level 4, 57% marked “Likely,” and 43% marked “Very likely.” Those at the intermediate level (3) were the most interested, with 75% responding “Very likely” and 25% responding “Likely.” Although those with the highest levels were interested in enrolling, those at the intermediate level showed even greater interest in enrolling. This unforeseen response perhaps arises from their perception of their intermediate proficiency. Seeing that there is still much room for improvement, they may be more interested than their highly proficient peers in taking ESL writing classes. Those who perceive themselves at a high level of proficiency may be comparatively less interested because it appears to them that their potential improvement is limited by their already high proficiency. Considering that the majority of respondents assessed themselves at levels 3 and 4, however, notable potential exists for the success of possible ESL courses at Southeastern University.

These conclusions are based upon the assumption that the sampling was an accurate representation of the non-native English speaking undergraduate students that attend Southeastern University. The sample size is, however, too small (n=12) to be considered statistically significant for sound quantitative and qualitative conclusions. Further investigation

must be conducted to ensure that the needs and interests of ESL students at Southeastern University are accurately understood and met. If the conclusions of this study are verified by further research on a larger scale, Southeastern University may wish to consider ESL courses as for-credit electives to serve non-native English speaking students.

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## Appendix A

## Survey Instrument

This study is being conducted as part of honors thesis research by Katherine Jones under the supervision of Dr. Annette Graves, Assistant Professor, Department of English and Foreign Languages. The purpose of this study is (1) to explore the English writing challenges faced by non-native speakers of English, especially students at the university level and (2) to evaluate interest regarding possible for-credit, English-as-a-second-language [*sic*] (ESL) courses at Southeastern University. All responses will remain confidential. This survey will serve to gather information regarding students' self-assessment of their English writing abilities and their interest in for-credit ESL courses. By taking this survey, you certify that you are 18 years of age or older you speak a language other than English as your first language you consent to participate. If you have any questions related to this survey, please feel free to contact [Ms. Jones] and/or [Dr. Graves]. Thank you so much for your assistance in this important research project! Your prompt response to the survey is appreciated.

1. Do you meet the above requirements?

- Yes
- No

2. Gender

- Male
- Female

3. Age group

- Under 18
- 18-26
- 27-35
- 36-50
- 50+

4. Race/Ethnicity

- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic
- Native American
- White/Caucasian

5. Please indicate which languages you speak (You may select more than one.)

- Chinese
- Creole
- English
- French
- Japanese

- Korean
- Portuguese
- Spanish
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

6. What language is most commonly spoken in your home?

- Chinese
- Creole
- English
- French
- Japanese
- Korean
- Portuguese
- Spanish
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

7. When did you first begin learning English?

- 0-5 years old
- 6-10 years old
- 11-15 years old
- 16-20 years old
- 21-25 years old
- 25+ years old

8.-9. Please rate your level of English in the following areas:

	Low		Intermediate		High
	1	2	3	4	5
Overall proficiency	<input type="radio"/>				
Writing	<input type="radio"/>				

10. On a scale of 1 (least) to 5 (most), what is your level of commitment to improving your ability to write in English?

- 1-Least
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5-Most

11. In what contexts do you see yourself using written English after graduation? Check all that apply.

- Job/Career
- Graduate education
- Family
- Community involvement
- Ministry
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

12. Being able to write well in English is how important to your future career?

- 1-Not Important
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5-Very Important

13. Not including schoolwork, how often do you write in English?

- Never
- 1-2 times a week
- 3-5 times a week
- 6-10 times a week
- Always

14. Please rate your level of ease when writing in English.

- 1-Easy
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5-Hard

15.-20. Please rate your current proficiency in the following English writing areas.

	Low				High
	1	2	3	4	5
Grammar	<input type="radio"/>				
Spelling	<input type="radio"/>				
Vocabulary	<input type="radio"/>				
Sentence formation	<input type="radio"/>				
Thought- development	<input type="radio"/>				
Cohesiveness [ <i>sic</i> ]	<input type="radio"/>				

21.-26. In the following areas, are your current college classes improving, weakening, or having no affect on your ability to write English?

	Weakening		No affect		Improving
	1	2	3	4	5
Grammar	<input type="radio"/>				
Spelling	<input type="radio"/>				
Vocabulary	<input type="radio"/>				
Sentence formation	<input type="radio"/>				
Thought development	<input type="radio"/>				
Cohesiveness	<input type="radio"/>				

27. How long have you been a student at Southeastern University? (1 year = 2 semesters)

- 1 semester
- 2 semesters
- 3-4 semesters

- 5-6 semesters
- 7-8 semesters
- 8+ semesters

28. What is your major?  
(Majors listed)

29. How often have you requested help with writing English from the Academic Center for Enrichment (ACE) during your time at Southeastern?

- 1+ times a week
- 2-3 times a month
- A few times a semester
- Never

30.-31. Please rate how helpful the following have been in improving your ability to write English.

	Not Helpful				Very Helpful		
	1	2	3	4	5	N/A	
ACE tutoring sessions	○	○	○	○	○	○	
ENGL 1033 College Reading and Writing	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

32. If Southeastern University offered one-credit hour elective English writing classes for English-language learners, how likely are you to enroll in one?

- Very likely
- Likely
- Not likely

33. If you answered “likely” or “very likely” to the previous question, how often are you likely to enroll in such a course?

- 1 course (just one semester)
- 2 courses (2 semesters in a row)
- 3 courses (3 semesters in a row)
- 4+ courses (4+ semesters in a row)

34.-37. How well does your current level of English proficiency meet your English language needs?

	Very Poorly				Very Well	
	1	2	3	4	5	
Reading	○	○	○	○	○	
Writing	○	○	○	○	○	
Speaking	○	○	○	○	○	
Listening	○	○	○	○	○	

38. If the following course options were available, which one(s) would you consider taking?  
Check all that apply.

- English writing course
- English speaking/listening course
- English vocabulary course
- None
- Other (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_

39. In what ways has Southeastern University helped you to improve your English language proficiency?

40. How could Southeastern become more effective in supporting your English language needs?

Thank you for participating in this research survey! Through this survey, we hope to better understand the needs of English language learners at Southeastern University.

Appendix B

Institutional Review Board Certificates



