

Is English 100 Valuable for English As a Second Language Students?

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Writing in a second language can be difficult and at an academic level in a second language -arduous. Second language writers can have problems writing in many different ways. Understanding the task and prompt can be a first difficulty. Sometimes home culture and first language influence the way students organize their papers which can be different from American academic writing. Second language writers also struggle with sentence level writing including vocabulary choice and syntax in ways that many first language writers do not contend with. Teachers, tutors, and administrators often seek solutions to help second language writers overcome these difficulties.

Composition classes typically focus on organizational or rhetorical patterns more so than on specific mechanical errors (grammar, spelling, punctuation) that students make. While teachers can often help students understand the global issues of an essay, the mechanical errors often require individualized attention. Ferris (1984) analyzed features of English as a second language writing and indicated that students definitely benefit from individual help in the areas of, “correct word choice, diversity in lexical/syntactic features, and use of cohesion and coherence devices” (p. 419). This study showed that attention to these features can help students learn them and use them correctly. Ferris did not advocate teaching grammar rules but instead recommended having students examine choices by novice and successful writers, and have individuals work on their papers by getting teacher and peer feedback. Harris and Silva (1993) recommend tutors as a solution to helping ESL writers. They specifically point out that if a tutor can work with a student several times on various drafts of a paper real improvement can be made. They also recommend tutors that are trained in dealing with ESL writing.

Sweedler-Brown (1994) showed that students with sentence level errors (syntax and word choice) were graded more harshly even using a holistic rubric than those same essays where the

sentence level errors were corrected. Many university writing programs emphasize writing process over product nowadays, the grading of the essays should reflect this, but instructors often get distracted and confused over syntactical, word choice, and punctuation errors which can result in frustration when grading and result in a lower grade than the paper might otherwise deserve (Canagarajah, 2002).

At Northern Arizona University, English 105 is the one of the required classes for most undergraduates. The class is designed to help students begin to read and write academically. The students do a total of six writing projects in a semester including analysis, evaluative, informative, and argumentative essays.. Some students entering the class have been well prepared in high school for this class, while other students have not been previously exposed to this type of writing.

In English 105, essays are graded on many different aspects including organization, research and citing, effectiveness of introduction and conclusion, and effectiveness of argument or application of criteria etc. Grammar, punctuation, and word choice are also included in the rubrics and usually weighted for 8-12 % of the total grade. NAU offers English 105, not only freshmen, but also to students who are in the fifth level at the Program for Intensive English (PIE). These second language students can take English 105, and if they pass they get credit university credit and usually are admitted to NAU as freshmen the following semester.

Because students come in at many different levels NAU offers English 100, a course that is available to students who are enrolled in English 105. The design of English 100 is to pair a English 105 student with a more experienced writer to give individualized help for one hour per week on the different writing projects. As it stands now these tutors might be graduate assistants in English or strong undergraduate writers. The students that enroll in English 100 either see

themselves as not having the writing skills they need to succeed in English 105 or are required to take the class because of admission standards.

In the past, level 5 PIE students taking English 105 were also assigned to take English 100. Since spring 2012, these students do not have the option to sign up for English 100. These students can go to the writing center and can get tutoring help from a program called Academic Support in English Studies (AcES). This offers limited hours for tutoring any international student with English help. While English 100 offered one university credit for students, no credit is given to students who go to get tutoring help.

### *Questions and Hypothesis*

Given the current situation for the PIE students taking English 105, this study attempts to answer three questions regarding this new policy for PIE students:

- 1) Do ENG 105 instructors think that ENG 100 is valuable for their second language students?
- 2) Do second language students find ENG 100 valuable to succeeding in ENG 105?
- 3) Are student grades significantly higher in ENG 105 when they take ENG 100?

To answer the first question, a survey was designed for instructors who were teaching English 105 and were teaching or had previously taught English 100 (Appendix A). This survey was given via an online survey company and emailed to the teaching assistants. To answer the second question a similar survey was for second language students to take (Appendix B). This survey was given to the English instructors if they responded positively that they had a second language writer in the class who was also enrolled in English 100. The English instructors then gave the survey to their students. For third question, grades were collected from PIE students

enrolled in English 105 and English 100 from Spring 2011. These grades were compared with those from PIE students enrolled in only English 105 from Fall 2012.

The study was had three hypotheses:

- 1) Instructors will report English 100 to be helpful to their students enrolled in English 105.
- 2) Students will report English 100 to be helpful in doing their assignments in English 105.
- 3) There will be a higher percentage of students that get better grades in English 105 with English 100.

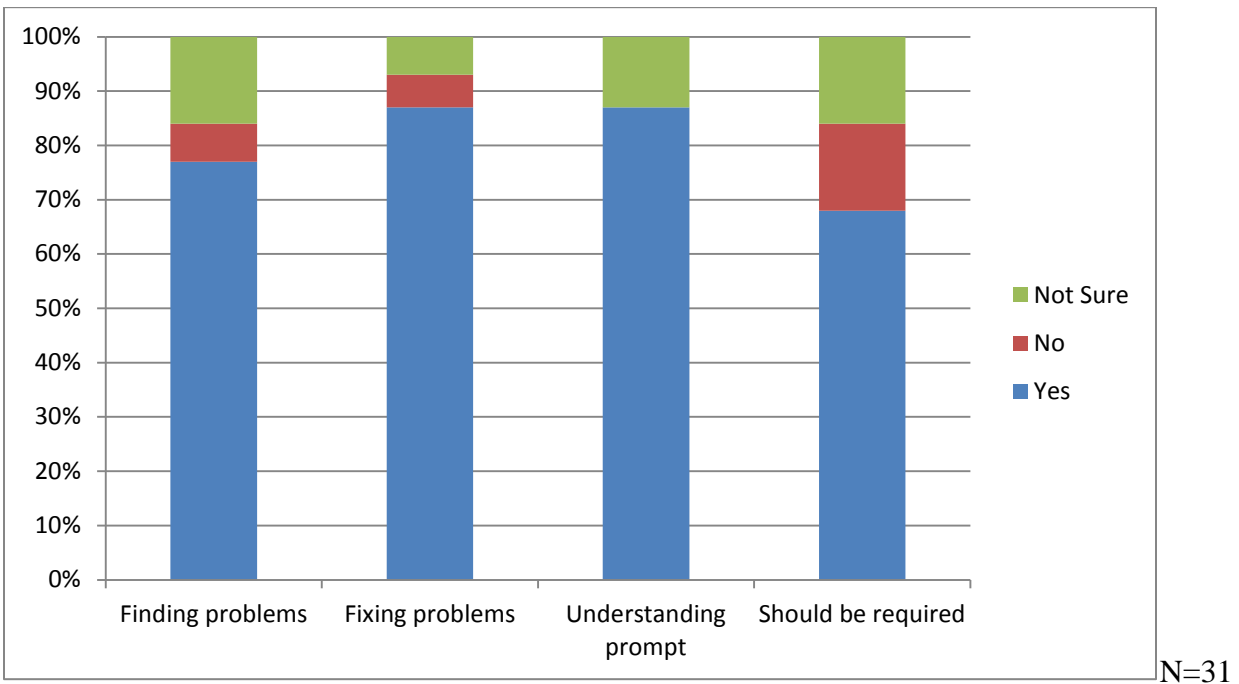
### *Participants and Methods and Results*

Those who participated in the first survey were all pursuing a graduate degree (M.A. or PhD) in English. Some students were in their first year of graduate school while others were further along. Some of the participants speak English as a first language and other have English as second language. All of the instructors were teaching English 105 and had taught or were currently teaching English 100.

Thirty-one instructors responded. Appendix A shows the survey questions that were given. Almost of the instructors thought that English 100 was helpful in many different ways. Sixty-eight percent recommended that English 100 be required for second language students. The results of the questions can be seen in Chart 1 below.

*Chart 1 Results of Questions from English 105 Instructors*

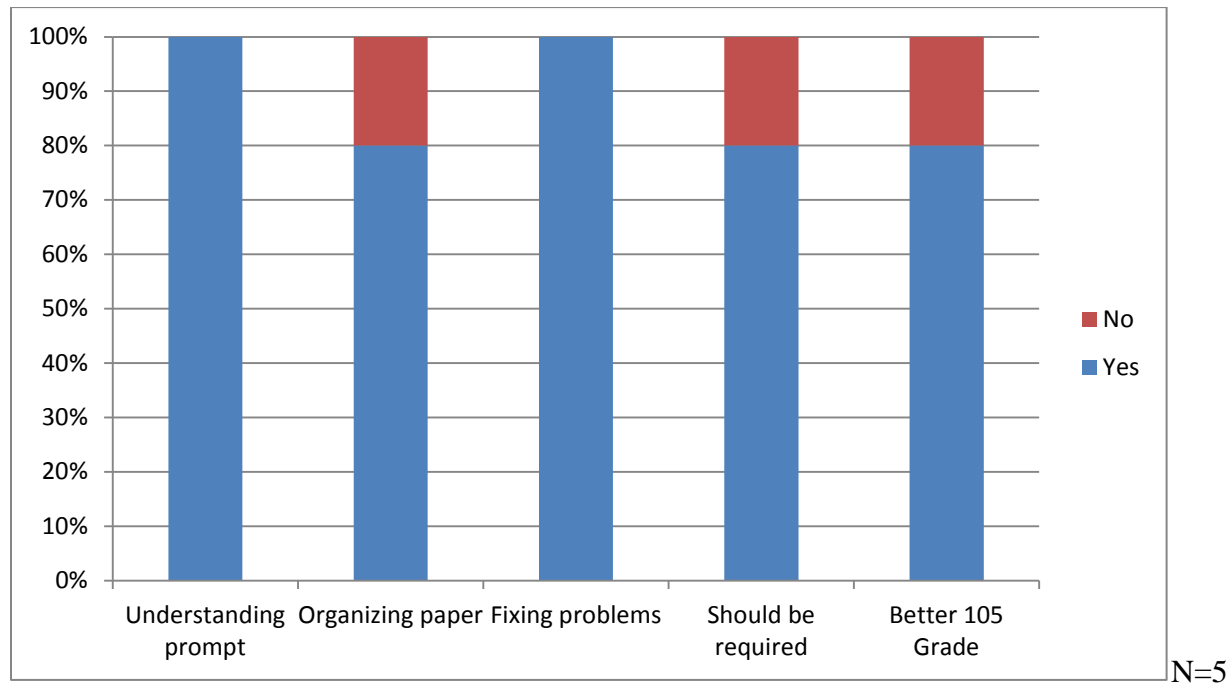
English 100 is helpful to ESL students in...



Since many of the instructors find English 100 valuable for second language learners, it is important to also see what the students thought. Chart 2 can be seen below and shows student responses to the questions on their survey (Appendix B). The participants here are second language learners who were taking English 105 and English 100. The sample size is small because only 5 students were found that met the criteria to be a second language learner, and enrolled in both English 105 and 100.

**Chart 2** *English as a Second Language Students' Responses to Questions Regarding English 100*

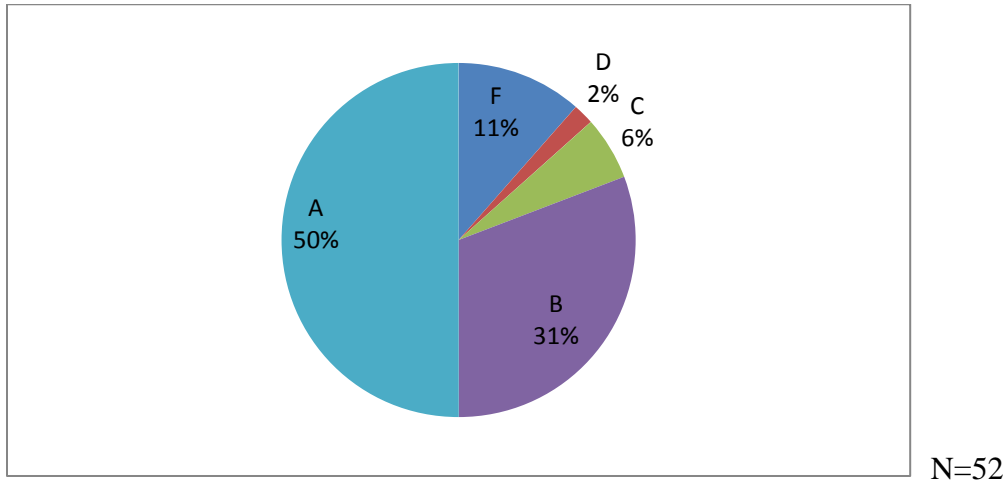
Is English 100 helpful for English 105 in...



As can be seen, all the students thought English 100 helped them understand the prompt and fix problems in their papers. Almost all thought it helped them organize their papers and get a better grade. Eighty percent even thought that it should be required for all second language learners.

It is clear that the most of the instructors and students report English 100 to be a helpful class in different areas regarding English 105. But a crucial third question remains: Are the grades significantly different for the two groups of students? The grades were tallied and then converted into percentages as can be seen in Charts 3 and 4 below.

**Chart 3** Grades Received by Second Language Students in English 105 without English 100.



**Chart 4** Grades Received by Second Language Students in English 105 with English 100

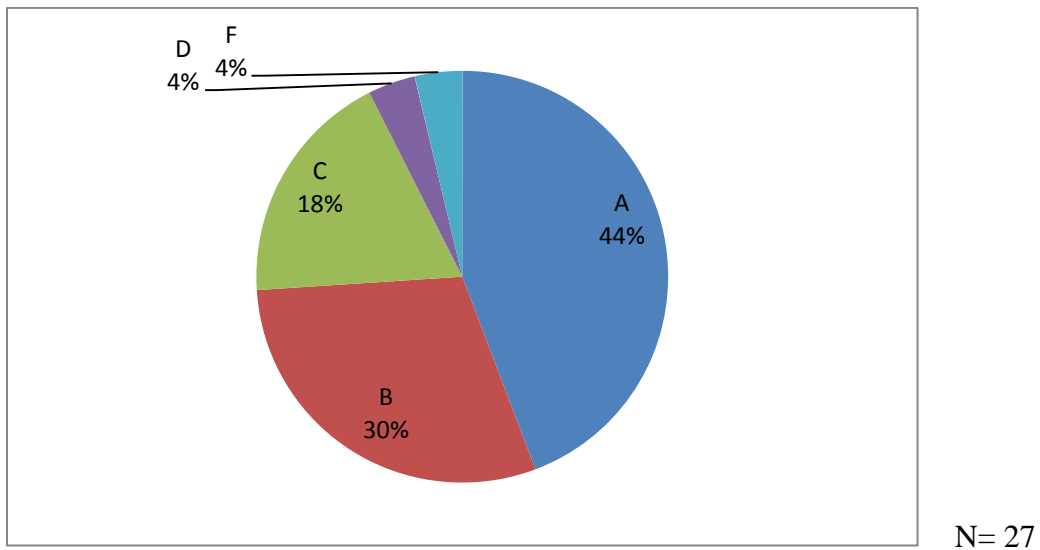


Chart 3 shows that half of the students not taking English 100 received A's in the class, but thirteen percent received a D or F in the class. Of those students that took English 100, forty-four percent received an A and eight percent received a D or F. In an attempt to analyze this

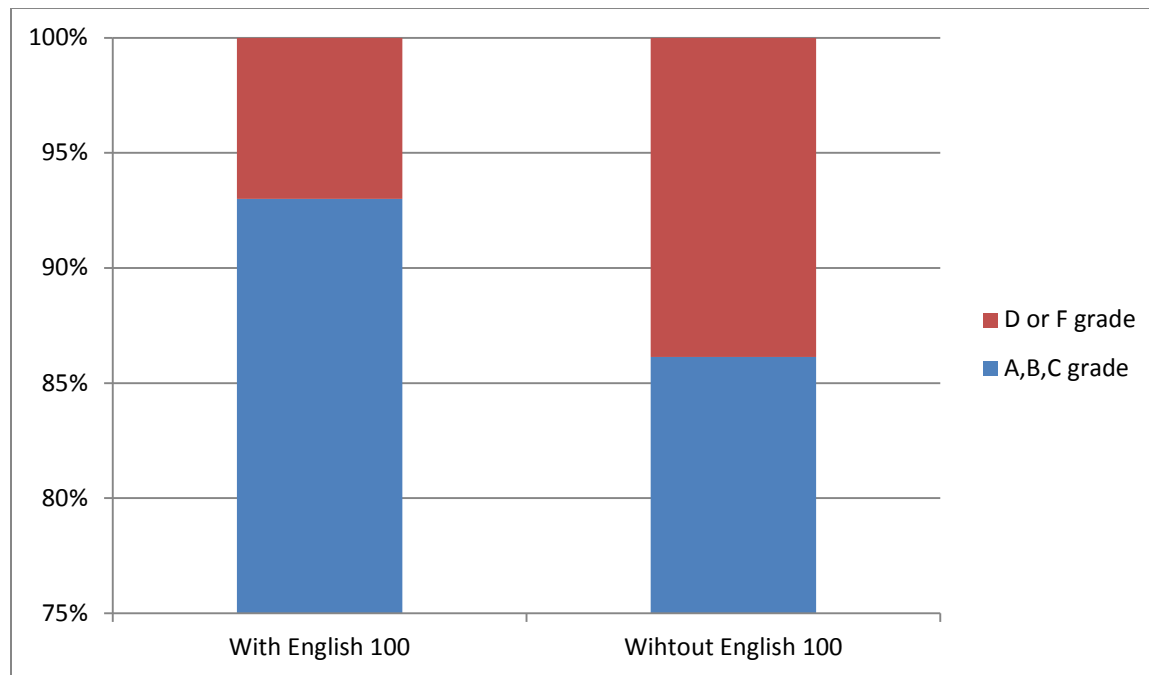


data further, the grades were then grouped into two groups, acceptable and not acceptable, based on NAU's policy that a class can be retaken if a D or F letter grade is received

- Acceptable grades: A, B, C
- Not Acceptable grades D, F

The percentages of these groups are shown in Chart 5 below. It can be seen that the percentage of acceptable grades (C or better ) is 92.6% with English 100, and without English 100 the percent of passing grades is passing grades are 86.6%.

**Chart 5** Percentage of Students receiving Acceptable and Not Acceptable Grades



In order to analyze the data to see if a significant difference was found give each grade a point value. (5=A, 4=B, 3=C, 2=D, and 1=F) and analyze the means by an Mann-Whitney test with the groups being English 100 or no English 100. When the grades means were averaged and then analyzed  $Z = -.424$  which does not show a significant difference. The other way this data was analyzed was to group the grades into two groups: acceptable grades A, B, C were

given a score of 1 and not acceptable grades were given a score of 2. Again a Mann-Whitney test showed a z score of  $-0.798$  which does not indicate a significant difference.

### *Discussion*

While intuitively it might appear that having a course to help second language writers would affect the grades of students, there may be other factors that influence the grades in this study and why they did not show a significant difference. The classes were taught by different teachers who may grade more easily or harshly. In the time between Spring 2011 and Fall 2012 the PIE may have trained students to be better writers before they got to English 105, so the tutorial help gotten from English 100 may not have been so crucial. Students may have gotten other help instead of English 100, including private tutoring, NAU tutoring, or help from friends. It would seem beneficial to actually do an analysis of the writing and compare it for different features to see if the writing seems significantly different for the two groups. It might also be helpful to redesign the study and have the same teacher have a class with half of the students taking English 100 and the other half not taking English 100 and then do an analysis of the grades.

### *Conclusion*

Even though the grades did not seem to differ significantly, both students and instructors seem to place value on English 100. The class is available all students in English 105, except to those also enrolled through the PIE. Some of the potentially most needy students do not have the opportunity to enroll in English 100 and these students still might benefit from being able to choose English 100 as an option.

References

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**Appendix A** Survey to English 105 Instructors: Use your experience as an English 100 tutor, an English 105 instructor or both to help answer these questions.

1) Have you read the informed consent forms and do you consent to participate in this research project.

Yes No

2) Do you think English 100 helps English as a Second Language students in English 105?

Yes No Not Sure

3) Do you think English 100 helps ESL students understand the prompt?

Yes No Not Sure

4) Do you think English 100 helps ESL students pick a good topic?

5)

Yes No Not Sure

6) Do you think English 100 helps ESL organize their papers?

Yes No Not Sure

7) Do you think English 100 helps ESL students find problems in their papers?

Yes No Not Sure

8) Do you think English 100 helps ESL students fix problems in their papers?

Yes No Not Sure

9) Do you think English 100 helps ESL students find good sources in their papers?

Yes No Not Sure

10) Do you think English 100 should be a class for all ESL students taking English 105?

Yes      No      Not Sure

**Appendix B**

Survey to Students:

Please Circle Yes or No for each question.

1) Do you think English 100 class helps you understand the writing assignments for English 105?

Yes                      No

2) Do you think English 100 class helps you organize your paper?

Yes                      No

3) Do you think English 100 class helps you fix problems in your paper?

Yes                      No

4) Do you think English 100 class helps you find a good topic?

Yes      No      Not Sure

5) Do you think English 100 class helps you to find good sources for your paper?

Yes      No

6) Do you think English 100 class helps you to get a better grade in English 105?

Yes      No

7) Do you think English 100 class should be a class all PIE English 105 students take?

Yes      No