Judges’ Commentary on “Modifying Reading and Writing Theories for the Writing Center: A Practical Guide for Tutors of ESL Students”

by Dara Liling

Third Place Award in the 2013-14 Composition Program Writing Contest

In “Modifying Reading and Writing Theories for the Writing Center: A Practical Guide for Tutors of ESL Students,” Dara Liling offers an innovative way for re-thinking how we help international students translate native literacy skills to serve English language-based curricular requirements. Her essay, written for an advanced composition course in the PPW curriculum, takes the form of a research-based article intended for publication in an academic journal. Liling grounds the evidentiary apparatus of her inquiry in her own experience working as a peer-tutor in the University of Pittsburgh Writing Center, where she engaged routinely in one-to-one tutorial relationships with international students. In thinking about the challenges involved in this process, she came to understand that the translation of intellectual insights from one language to another was not a matter of simple transliteration, but involved culturally induced rhetorical habits that surpass the limits of one-to-one correspondences. Her ambition was to find and frame out a theory-based paradigm for conceptualizing this work, for both tutor and writer, as something more than routine error-correction.

One of the standard tropes for constructing original academic research is to borrow a concept from a seemingly remote or inapplicable site and to shift its initiative over to the problem immediately at hand for the researcher. That is precisely what Liling does with the work of two scholars whose work came to prominence in the 1980s: Wolfgang Iser, a German reader-response theorist, from whom she borrows the concepts of “artist” and “aesthete,” in relation to text production and reception, and Ann Berthoff, an American composition theorist, from whom she borrows the concepts of “thought” and “concept,” in relation to ideational “formation.” Neither theorist directed their project primarily toward second-language instruction in tutorial contexts. Liling’s essay articulates that “translation” for us, systematically, synthetically, carefully and compellingly, in the best tradition of scholarly enterprise.