ESL classrooms are often viewed with a veil of mystery. What goes on behind that closed door? How does the teacher turn incorrectly conjugated prose into creative insights and solid arguments? While many people have researched the ways in which to provide better pedagogical practices for ESL learners, I believe the classroom climate and relationships formed within the classroom create the most conducive steps for learning for ESL students. Creating an environment where each student feels comfortable to make mistakes and learn from them reinforces the learning process and provides extra learning opportunities for others.

Paul Matsuda in his essay “Situating ESL Writing in a Cross-Disciplinary Context” presents three types of models for ESL composition. In the first model, the division of labor model, Matsuda discusses the division of ESL and first-language composition. In this model, “The first-language/second language distinction may be applicable to TESL—because by definition, it is concerned with the learning and the teaching of a second language—but not so much to composition studies” (107). This model tends to focus on the acquisition of language as an oral form rather than a written form. It separates the idea of composition theory and ESL pedagogy and doesn't provide an overlap of knowledge which could effectively influence both disciplines.

The second model Matsuda presents is the disciplinary intersection model which “creates a space shared by both disciplines, thus facilitating dialogue between researchers from two distinct traditions.” This model focuses on bringing aspects of composition theory in conversation with ESL pedagogical practices. This system also creates an equal amount of ESL learners within the context of non-ESL learners. The integration of ESL students and non-ESL students creates a climate of cultural connection.
The last model, which Matsuda supports, is the symbiotic model. In this model ESL consists on a continuum in the same way that non-ESL writers consist within a continuum. This model uses the same idea of integration of ESL pedagogy and composition theory that the intersection-discipline model uses; however, it opens up the model to provide more than one place for composition and ESL pedagogy to take place. Matsuda explains that “Because ESL writers can be found anywhere on these TESL composition continua, teaching writing to ESL students can no longer be considered the sole responsibility of ESL writing specialists; all writing teachers who have ESL students in their classrooms . . . are to some extent already teachers of ESL writing” (111). Therefore, not all teachers need to be experts in ESL writing but should be aware of a continuing praxes that is evolving.

I would argue that symbiotic model places itself within the writing across communities mindset which connects writing within the responsibility of all teachers, not solely the English department and not isolated to ESL classrooms. This may seem a little overwhelming for someone who has no experience with ESL students; however, I believe that by creating a positive classroom environment, any teacher can help assist ESL learners.

I'm fortunate to have both a secondary education degree and endorsement in ESL which provides an experienced background for me to teach both ESL 101 and 102. These classes are introductory composition courses in which each student at the University must pass with a C or higher in order to graduate from the University. In my classroom, I use the same texts that other teachers use for mainstream 101 and 102 classes. I use the same guidelines and rubrics that other teachers use for mainstream students. In fact, last semester, I taught a mainstream 101 class and an ESL 101 class with the same syllabus
and same texts. Very rarely did I deviate from the syllabus for the ESL section. What I found was that discussion for the ESL sections took a little longer. I needed to explain certain concepts that mainstream student instinctively understood from a culturally. For example, as an in-class assignment, I had students practice close-reading skills with the Gettysburg address. While I asked a few background questions to the mainstream students to refresh their understanding of the historical significance, I had to go into an elaborate history lesson for the ESL students. These small but needed adjustments take time in an ESL classroom, but it doesn't change how well ESL students understand material when the material is scaffolded to reach the cultural and linguistically gaps in their knowledge of English and of American culture.

While Matsuda's article rightfully places critical importance on the research aspects of integrating composition composition theory and ESL pedagogy and having an understanding of the ever-evolving praxes of ESL writing, it places the classroom environment and community building in the margin of the discussion rather than in the middle.

As an introductory assignment earlier this semester, I asked students what they liked about attending an ESL section, what they didn't like about being separated from the other mainstream classes, and how they would improve the class. Because the students knew I would be looking at their answers, a certain sense of autonomy was lost. However, while students may not have been as forth write with their answers, I do believe they were accurate in their feelings. Many stated that the ESL classroom created an environment where they felt safe to speak in class and that they felt comfortable making mistakes. Some stated that in other mainstream classes they never spoke and the teacher never called on them. Yet the students knew in the ESL classroom that others
would be patient in trying to understand them.

One student wrote that in a mainstream class the teacher had asked for the students to get into groups for a project. No one would be in a group with the ESL student. He stated how he knew a great deal about the subject matter, but the other students didn’t want him in their group because they were fearful their own grades would be lowered because of his lack of English language skills. This student stated that being in an ESL class gave him companionship and a sense of belonging that he didn't feel in other mainstream classes.

It is important for teachers to be qualified and feel confident about their teaching practices for ESL students; however, I believe it is the classroom environment created by that instructor which effectively maintains a conducive learning environment. The same instructional strategies that make it easier for mainstream students to learn will work with ESL students.

Oftentimes the power of connection is overlooked in the ability for one to learn. In my opinion, research cannot always quantitatively or qualitatively suggest how much relationships and classroom environment affect students in the classroom, especially ESL students who do not have the same type of support that most mainstream students take for granted. The Matsuda's symbiotic model of ESL instruction helps widen the responsibility, but those who may be fearful of contending with ESL issues should look first to create a positive classroom environment.