Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language

Second Edition

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II
Language Skills
D. Writing

The ability to express one's ideas in written form in a second or foreign language and to do so with reasonable accuracy and coherence is a major achievement; many native speakers of English never truly master this skill. Olshtain's chapter shows how the teacher of even beginning-level ESL/EFL students can provide practice in writing which reinforces the language the students have learned and which teaches valuable mechanics of writing (e.g., penmanship, spelling, punctuation, format) right from the start. Kroll's chapter gives the reader a comprehensive overview of current theory and method in teaching writing to nonnative speakers of English, especially with reference to teaching ESL students in courses devoted exclusively to the writing skill. Finally, Frodesen's chapter explores the problematic area of grammar (i.e., accuracy) in writing which plagues so many nonnative speakers even after they have more or less mastered the more global features of written English, such as organization and coherence.

signments presented to students, teachers must also make a number of other decisions about assignments. They must decide *where* the writing is to be produced: in class or at home. When students are writing in class, teachers are often uncertain of what they themselves should be doing while the students are writing. Students also generally feel pressured by the limited amount of time available. When students write at home, teachers may be concerned that the student might receive outside input from another writer or from textual material, rendering the student's text unrepresentative of his/her own writing. For some students, writing at home will be completed in even less time than writing produced in class (Kroll, 1982). One way to resolve this is that some assignments should be considered "timed" writing, written in a given time framework, submitted, and responded to as final products, while other writing assignments can be prepared over a span of several class periods (either in class or at home) and feedback provided to assist in the revision process.

In fact, another decision teachers must make concerns the number of drafts for any given text that they want students to produce. Given the immense value to the student writer of learning to revise text and to work through a series of drafts before considering a paper "finished," new writing topics should not be assigned before the student has had a chance to work through a cycle of drafts on a prior assignment. If the teacher's goal is to foster student improvement, then providing a multiplicity of writing assignments on different topics (whether they be of the rhetorical pattern type or prompted by a more open-ended approach) will not allow students sufficient time to devote to working on writing in progress. That is, students working on a second or third draft of a given topic which is scheduled to be submitted the following week should not simultaneously be working on a first draft of yet another topic. But as Reid (1984) cautions us against dogmatism in presenting approaches to how students generate texts, Harris (1989) cautions us against dogmatism in applying an inflexible call for revision. In her research, Harris (1989) finds that writers range along a continuum from what she calls "one- to multi-drafters," and not everyone benefits from being asked to produce multiple revisions since the preferred strategy for some successful writers is to produce a single, polished draft. She notes, in fact, that "studies of revision do not provide the conclusive picture that we need in order to assert that we should continue coaxing our students into writing multiple drafts" (Harris, 1989, p. 175) because both efficient and inefficient writers are to be found who favor one or the other of these approaches to writing.

A final consideration regarding topic design is one of essay length, for in cases where teachers don't specify length, students often want to know how long their papers should be. Many ESL students are concerned with doing the bare minimum and will invariably submit very short papers; others may produce far too much text for the teacher to find time to respond to, or for the student to be able to process and benefit from the extensive feedback that the teacher might need to provide on a lengthy but highly problematic text. One must bear in mind the need for a relationship between what the topic calls for and the length of paper produced. For example, to ask students to write 250 words on an encyclopedic topic is to ensure superficiality of treatment; conversely, to ask them to produce a lengthy paper on a narrowly focused topic is to invite padding and digressions. Also, what a teacher believes a student will learn from preparing a particular assignment should not be out of proportion to the amount of time the student will need to invest in preparing it.

Finally, if one believes that students best learn to write by writing, then the design of writing tasks is perhaps the key component of curriculum design. It is in the engagement with, and the completion of, writing tasks that students will be most directly immersed in the development of their writing skills; thus, a great deal of thought must go into choosing such tasks.

Responding

Responding to student writing—once seen as the main task of the writing teacher and certainly the most time-consuming one—is a complex process which also requires the teacher to make a number of critical decisions. Key questions to address include these:

1. What are the general goals within the writing course of providing feedback to student writers?
2. What are the specific goals of providing feedback on a particular piece of writing?
3. At what stage in the writing process should feedback be offered?
4. What form should feedback take?
5. Who should provide the feedback?
6. What should students do with the feedback they receive?

Goal Setting

Responding to student writing has the general goal of fostering student improvement. While this may seem to be stating the obvious, teachers need to develop/adopt responding methodologies which *can* foster improvement; they need to know how to measure or recognize improvement when it does occur. Although the teaching of first language writing has come a long way since most response took the form of written *criticism* by the teacher detailing what the student had done wrong on a paper, and teaching ESL writing has ceased to be seen as a vehicle for monitoring student acquisition of grammar, there remains no easy answer to the question of what type of response will facilitate improved student mastery of writing. In reviewing dozens of research studies investigating various methodologies of responding, Hillocks (1986, p. 165) concluded, "The results of all these studies strongly suggest that teacher comment has little impact on student writing." Therefore, in setting goals, teachers should focus on implementing a variety of response types and on training students to maximize the insights of prior feedback on future writing occasions.

Shaping Feedback

Regardless of whatever repertoire of strategies teachers develop to provide feedback on student papers, students must also be trained to use the feedback in ways that will improve their writing—be it on the next draft of a particular paper or on another assignment. Without such training, it is quite likely that students will either ignore feedback or fail to use it constructively. In fact, research studies to date have shown a number of discouraging findings. Research on how L1 students process written response from teachers has indicated that (1) sometimes students fail to read the written comments on their papers, caring only about the grade (Burkland & Grimm, 1986); (2) sometimes they do not understand or indeed misinterpret the written comments, and find themselves unable to make appropriate changes in future drafts (Hayes & Daiker, 1984); (3) sometimes they use comments to psych out a particular teacher's personal agenda, only hoping "to make the teacher happy" in the future (Freedman, 1987; Sperling & Freedman, 1987); and (4) sometimes they become hostile at the teacher's appropriation of their text (Leki, 1990, p. 3). In research on student response to comments in an L2 environment, Leki (1986) found that students expressed a lack of interest in teacher reaction to the content of their papers, and instead indicated a desire to have every error marked on their papers. Cohen (1987) found that students had a very limited repertoire of strategies for processing feedback, and as such, Cohen and Cavalcanti (1990, p. 176) conclude, "Clear teacher-student agreements on feedback procedures and student training in strategies for handling feedback could lead to more productive and enjoyable composition writing in the classroom."

To address some of these issues, one step is to assure that the feedback on a particular piece of writing addresses that text in the context of how it was produced and with a clear agenda for what the student is expected to do with any feedback. In a process-oriented

classroom, for example, students routinely produce more than one draft of an essay, reflecting the steps of producing real-world texts. Thus, feedback on a first draft should most appropriately provide guidelines and suggestions for how to produce a second draft which would show improvement at the level of content and organization. However, Zamel (1985, p. 81) reported that studies provide "overwhelming evidence that teachers attend to surface-level features in what should otherwise be considered first drafts," completely ignoring the philosophy of process which they claim to espouse. In examining the responding behaviors of 15 ESL teachers by reviewing their written comments on portfolios of student papers, Zamel (1985, p. 93) goes on to identify a host of "incongruous types of comments" in which "the major revisions suggested and the interlinear responses are at odds with one another." This use of "mixed signals" helps explain why many students find it difficult to decipher teacher commentary. Why, for example, should the student pay attention to problems in the sequence of tenses in a particular paragraph if a marginal or end note indicates that the whole paragraph is irrelevant to the development of the paper?

As with other issues we have discussed, the question of the teacher's philosophy is a key determinant of his or her approach to commenting. Zamel (1985, p. 86) notes of her 15 ESL teacher subjects:

> . . . the teachers overwhelmingly view themselves as language teachers rather than writing teachers; they attend primarily to surface-level features of writing and seem to read and react to a text as a series of separate sentences or even clauses, rather than as a whole unit of discourse.

Unless the teacher adopts the stance of a *writing* teacher, he or she will be unable to provide feedback appropriate to that role.

Forms of Feedback

Up to now we have been discussing feedback that is provided in writing by the teacher on various drafts of a student paper, a fairly traditional and undoubtedly time-consuming method, even for those teachers who do not respond to every draft as a finished product. But there are other ways for students to receive feedback on their writing which can and should be considered in structuring a writing course. Writing teachers who view themselves as judges or repositories of certain truths about effectiveness in writing will want, of course, to be in charge of providing feedback to their students, believing that such feedback can play a vital role in the improvement of student writing. Those who view themselves as coaches or editorial advisors will also want to provide feedback, though not necessarily in the same way. Teachers should bear in mind that feedback can be oral as well as written, and they should consider the value of individual conferences[7] on student papers and/or the use of tape cassettes as two additional ways to structure teacher feedback. From another point of view, most writing teachers realize that they have many students in one class and they might also be teaching two or more writing classes, so the teacher has a very limited amount of time to provide feedback to any one student. Teachers whose philosophies embrace the value of collaborative learning[8] therefore turn to the other students in the class to assist in the feedback process. Other students in the writing class can be taught to provide valuable feedback in the form of peer response, which serves to sharpen their critical skills in analyzing written work as well as to increase their ability to analyze their own drafts critically.

Oral Teacher Feedback. Because of potential communication problems, ESL students in a writing class need to have individual conferences with their teacher even more than native-speaking students do. Conferences of about 15 minutes seem to work best, and can provide the teacher an opportunity to directly question the student about intended messages which are often difficult to decipher by simply reading a working draft. Further, conferences allow the teacher to uncover potential misunderstandings the student might have about prior written feedback or issues in writing that have been discussed in class. Another benefit is that students can usually learn more in the one-to-one exchange than they can when attempting to decipher teacher-written commentary on their own.

Some teachers provide all their feedback orally by asking students to submit a cassette tape with each draft. This method probably works best when the teacher silently reads a student's paper and makes comments directly into the tape recorder while marking some accompanying numbers or symbols on the student's text. For ESL students, this method has the advantage of providing more extensive feedback than that likely to be made in writing, as well as allowing the student to replay the tape as many times as necessary to understand and benefit from the teacher's comments. Once the teacher has learned to use this technique, it probably takes less time to complete taped remarks about a paper than it would to put them in writing.

Peer Response.[9] Because the use of peer response is a key component of classrooms teaching writing as a process in the L1 environment, many ESL teachers embraced the idea of having students read and/or listen to each other's papers for the purpose of providing feedback and input to each other as well as helping each other gain a sense of audience. But embracing a philosophy without understanding how to translate it to the L2 environment can often lead to rather disappointing results. That is, simply putting students together in groups of four or five, each with rough draft in hand, and then having each student in turn read his or her paper aloud, followed by having the other members of the group react to the strengths and weaknesses of the paper in the role of interested audience member, indicating further reader needs that have not been addressed, is *not* a format likely to work with even the most sophisticated class of ESL students. Because ESL students lack the language competence of native speakers, who can often react intuitively to their classmates' papers, peer responding in the ESL classroom must be modeled, taught, and controlled in order for it to be a valuable activity.

One way to control peer response is for teachers to provide a short list of directed questions which students address as they read their own or other students' papers. A first exercise of this type can involve giving students a short checklist of attributes to look for in their own papers, such as to check for a particular grammatical feature that might have been discussed in class (e.g., subject–verb agreement) or to check to assure that no irrelevancies have been included. The checklist is submitted with the paper as a way for the student to assume responsibility for reading over his or her paper carefully. Next, students can be trained to read and respond to other students' papers by reviewing an essay written by a student in a previous class and working through, as a class, a peer editing sheet that asks a few specific questions that would elicit both a general reaction to the paper and suggestions for improvement. As the students gain practice in reading and analyzing each other's papers and their awareness of the conventions of writing increases, the questions can be made more complex and varied. Some typical questions to begin with might include these: "What is the main purpose of this paper?" "What have you found particularly effective in the paper?" "Do you think the writer has followed through on what the paper set out to do?" Some peer guideline sheets for students who have more practice in the technique might include the following steps: "Find at least three places in the essay where you can think of questions that have not been answered by the writer. Write those questions in the margins as areas for the writer to answer in the next draft." "Read only the introduction and then write what you predict the rest of the essay will discuss. Then read the essay and compare your predictions with the actual content of the essay."

In order to maximize the value of the feedback to the ESL student, responses should be written, incidentally providing practice in the valuable skill of text analysis for the student commentator. These written responses can be given to the student writer with or without the anonymity of the student reader preserved or used as the basis for oral discussion between reader(s) and writer. The teacher might also want to read the student feedback sheets to assess the analytical skills of the student readers.

Error Correction

Regardless of what agenda the writing teacher sets and the number of drafts that students produce, the papers that ESL students write are likely to exhibit problems in language control. However, it is very important that the teacher not be swayed by the presence or numbers of these problems into turning a writing course into a grammar course. Rather, error must be dealt with at an appropriate stage of the composing process, and is perhaps best considered part of the final editing phase. The role of editing, when seen as distinct from rewriting, is essentially working to eliminate grammatical problems and stylistic infelicities; this type of editing is certainly essential to the production of good prose, but it should be an activity that is probably best attended to when a text is considered complete in terms of having been shaped by content, organization, attention to the needs of the reader, and a consideration of its purpose. In fact, editing or correcting errors on first drafts can be a counterproductive activity, possibly exacerbating whatever insecurities students might have about their writing and drawing their attention away from the other kinds of revision work that must be attended to. Chenoweth (1987, p. 28) concedes, "It may be hard for teachers to give up their habit of correcting every grammatical mistake," but also believes that grammatical problems should only be dealt with "when the meaning the student wants to express has been adequately dealt with (Chenoweth, 1987, p. 28).

In addition to deciding *when* to correct errors, teacher must also decide *who* will correct the errors, *which* errors to correct, and *how* to correct errors. Besides the obvious role the teacher plays as a corrector of errors, the student writer and other students in the class can also be called upon to provide feedback on errors as part of the peer feedback process. Again, the use of a checklist naming specific grammatical features often helps to focus student attention on areas the teacher feels the student should be able to monitor for and self-correct. (For a discussion of methods which can be used to train students in error detection procedures, see the chapter by Frodesen in this volume.)

The decision whether to address all or selected errors is a complex one and probably depends a great deal on the level of writing the student is capable of producing. However, correcting all of a student's errors is probably rarely called for, unless there are very few errors present in the text. Rather, the teacher should probably concentrate on calling the student's attention to those errors which are considered more serious and/or represent a pattern of errors in that particular student's writing. In a survey of 164 faculty members at Iowa State University asking about 12 typical ESL errors, Vann, Myer, and Lorenz (1984) noted a consensus among faculty in all disciplines regarding a hierarchy of error in terms of what were perceived to be more and less serious problems. Traditionally, we take "serious" to mean that which most interferes with communication, so errors of sentence structure are very important to deal with, while those errors which are unlikely to lead to faulty interpretation or to interfere with the reading process might be seen to be less significant. Unfortunately, some errors which are not serious by these standards tend to have an "irritation factor," and many faculty outside ESL programs, for example, find little tolerance for errors in ESL writing which seem like careless proofreading mistakes to them, most notably mistakes in article usage. Since mastery of the article system is actually a very difficult task, consciousness raising about typical ESL learner problems among non-ESL faculty might be just as important as attempts to improve proficiency in article usage among ESL students.

Finally, the "how" of calling students' attention to the errors they have committed is also a complex issue. Teachers can choose to (1) point out specific errors using a mark in the margin or an arrow or other symbolic system; (2) correct (or model) specific errors by writing in the corrected form; (3) label specific errors according to the feature they violate (e.g., subject–verb agreement), using either the complete term or a symbol system; (4) indicate the presence of error but not the precise location (e.g., noting that there are problems with word forms); or (5) ignore specific errors. Most teachers use a combination of two or more of the methods mentioned above, depending on what they perceive to be the needs of the student, and studies of teacher feedback are inconclusive as to what the best methodology might be. One study of feedback procedures by Robb, Ross and Shortreed (1986, p. 88), for example, concludes that "the more direct methods of feedback do not tend to produce results commensurate with the amount of effort required of the instructor to draw the student's attention to the surface error." However, another study by Fathman and Whalley (1990) involving feedback on content versus feedback on grammar reports that all students who received feedback on grammar improved the grammatical accuracy of their revised texts while only some students improved the content of their writing following feedback on content. The best approach to feedback on errors must undoubtedly derive from considering the circumstances of the individual student coupled with the goals of the course and the stage of the composing process a particular draft reflects.

CONCLUSION

Producing a successful written text is a complex task which requires simultaneous control over a number of language systems as well as an ability to factor in considerations of the ways the discourse must be shaped for a particular audience and a particular purpose. Teaching ESL students to become successful writers is no less a complex task. But it can be a tremendously rewarding one as well.

This chapter has presented some of the issues involved in establishing an ESL writing curriculum and in teaching the ESL writing class. As the ability to write well in a second language is no doubt even more difficult to achieve than the ability to read, speak, or understand the language, it is not surprising that many students take several years to achieve even a modicum of success. What must be emphasized to teachers in training is the importance of designing curriculum and shaping classes with a clear understanding of how the acquisition of written skills can be fostered. Our real goal is to gradually wean our students away from us, providing them with strategies and tools for their continued growth as writers and for the successful fulfillment of future writing tasks they might face once they have completed their last writing course with us. Earlier hopes to find the best method "were based on the faulty assumptions that there was a best method and one just had to find it, that teaching writing was a matter of prescribing a logically ordered set of written tasks and exercises, and that good writing conformed to a predetermined and ideal model" (Zamel, 1987, p. 697). There can be no "best" method when students' learning styles are so different; our hope now is rather to find methodologies which empower students rather than restrict them, and to create courses which arise from principled decisions derived from thorough research investigations.

The growth of composition studies as a discipline with its own independent body of research (apart from, say, literary studies or