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## **The reflective L2 writing teacher**

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### **Abstract**

This article reports on the use of journals by prospective ESOL teachers who each conducted student-teacher conferences in writing, as part of the requirements of a writing methods course in an MATESOL program. Writing journal entries about conferencing and providing feedback on student writing required the prospective teachers of this study to confront themselves with what they know; to evaluate themselves as writers, teachers, and learners; and to reflect on the practice of teaching writing in English to speakers of other languages. By describing how teachers adjusted their expectations about improving student writing and discovered themselves as writers, this article presents a case for making individual conferencing and subsequent reflection through journal writing an integral part of L2 writing teacher education. This paper also discusses lessons learned by the methods course instructor from requiring this practical training as part of the teacher preparation course.

**Key words:** writing conference, journal writing, teacher reflection, feedback on writing.

## **Introduction**

While most ESOL teacher candidates enter TESOL programs having had some form of teaching experience, few have specifically taught ESOL writing. In addition to the fact that writing can be time consuming and difficult to teach, many ESOL teachers may not feel qualified to teach writing because they have not received adequate specific training in the teaching of writing. Traditionally, TESOL programs have placed more emphasis on oral and reading skills than on writing skills. Compounding the problem is many prospective teachers' lack of confidence in their own writing - teachers often avoid teaching writing because they themselves do not feel comfortable with writing. How can teachers improve their teaching of writing while developing their skills as writers and learners? This article describes one approach that has proved to be effective for a group of teacher candidates in an ESOL writing methods course, which the author taught in an MATESOL program. Specifically, this article describes how prospective teachers held one-on-one conferences as writing tutors on a regular basis and maintained reflective journals based on that experience.

## **Research on Teacher Feedback on Student Writing**

For the past several decades, research on L1 and L2 composition has emphasized the importance of composition teachers' roles in providing feedback on student writing. Reid (1993: 217) notes that the ESL writing teacher "plays several different roles, among them coach, judge, facilitator, evaluator, interested reader, and copy editor". Research investigating student reactions to teacher responses has shown that students generally expect and value their teachers' feedback on their writing (e.g. Cohen & Cavalcanti,

1990; Ferris, 1995). Other research suggests that student-teacher conferences are an effective means of providing comments on student writing (Harris & Silva, 1993; Zamel, 1985). Many students, teachers, and researchers believe that conferences are valuable because they allow students to control the interaction, clarify their teachers' responses, and negotiate meaning. Conferences also provide prospective teachers with little or no teaching experience with an excellent opportunity to practice providing feedback on student writing, which is an integral part of their job as writing teachers. Furthermore, conferences enable teachers to assess how students react to their feedback and how their comments help students revise their writing.

### **The Reflective Approach to Teacher Training**

Although conferencing has proven to be beneficial for both teachers and students, very few studies have investigated how systematic reflection on the conferencing experience helps writing teachers improve their teaching of writing. The potential benefits of using teaching and learning journals as a tool for self-reflection by students in teacher education programs are well documented in a number of studies (e.g. Crandall, 2000; Dart, Boulton-Lewis, Brownlee, & McCrindle, 1998; Halbach, 1999). By emphasizing the importance of providing contexts where teacher candidates use their educational experiences to construct an understanding of their philosophy of teaching, the reflective approach enables prospective teachers to integrate theory and practice and to plan their personal and professional development. In writing about reflection related to action, Schön (1987) distinguishes between 'reflection-in-action,' which addresses thought processes during an event and allows for modification of actions as they occur, from "reflection-on-action," which focuses on thinking subsequent to the completion of

the event. Both of these types of reflection are involved in constructing and reconstructing experience, and can be facilitated by maintaining a journal. Such a process helps prospective teachers to be aware of how learners experience learning, which is necessary for teachers to be effective.

This article is a response to Schön's (1987: 322) advice that teacher educators begin teacher preparation courses '...by engaging teachers in tasks to explore their own learning'. Individual student-teacher conferencing and subsequent reflection on the conferencing experiences through journal writing may be one way of enabling such learning to take place for prospective L2 writing teachers.

### **Participants**

The participants in the study were ten MATESOL students (four non-native and six native speakers of English) enrolled in Education 655: Teaching writing to ESOL/Bilingual students. Students took this 3-credit hour course as an elective toward an M.A. in TESOL consisting of 36 hours in TESOL methodologies, second language acquisition, cross-cultural communication, instructional systems design, and testing and evaluation. The M.A. students in the writing methods course were assessed based on their weekly assignments, journals on tutoring, a final exam, and class participation. Each teacher candidate was assigned an adult English language learner enrolled in university ESOL writing courses to work with for the semester. In their writing courses, the ESOL students were expected to develop academic writing skills through the process of prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing on a variety of topics. The students were

exposed to a range of organizational and grammatical structures appropriate for academic discourse through authentic readings and language activities.

### **Procedures**

During the first few weeks of the methods course, sample ESOL student essays were reviewed to illustrate techniques for providing feedback on student writing. The essays were one to two pages in length and were obtained with the authors' permission to be used without their names. Overhead transparencies of seven sample essays were prepared and paper copies of each essay were distributed to every teacher. Two of the sample essays were reviewed using overhead transparencies, as the teachers took notes on their own paper copies (see the next paragraph for details on feedback techniques reviewed). The class was then divided into five groups of three or four and each group was assigned to work with one of the five remaining essays. Each group was provided with an overhead transparency copy of its assigned essay and was asked to identify and address two or three specific issues with the writing. Each group designated a reporter who marked up the transparency and presented the group's proposals to the whole class.

The teachers were instructed to engage their students in a conversation about their writing and encourage student input during conferences (Goldstein and Conrad, 1990). The effectiveness of various types of written teacher comments on producing subsequent student revisions was also reviewed (Ferris, 1995; Hedgcock and Lefkowitz, 1994; Leki, 1990). The teachers were instructed not to discuss every error but to focus on two or three major issues with their student's writing during each session, starting first with content and organization of the writing, then grammar (Harris and Silva, 1993; Woodward,

1981). The teachers learned that once the content more or less expresses what the student is trying to say, feedback on grammar could be used to refine revisions. However, if students misuse structures that will clearly recur in a particular piece of writing, the teachers were asked to make limited grammar corrections earlier so that these could be incorporated in subsequent revisions (Leki, 1992). When addressing grammatical errors, the teachers were instructed to first determine whether a given error is persistent and devise a mini grammar lesson that allows students to compare correct and incorrect usages. For example, a teacher may write out a correct version of an incorrect sentence and ask the student to describe the differences between the correct and the incorrect form.<sup>1</sup>

Starting about the fourth week for the remainder of the semester, each teacher held individual writing conferences with an assigned student once every two weeks. Shortly after the conclusion of each conference, the teacher candidates wrote about the session in their journals. They were asked to report how they identified and addressed the writing problems and to describe difficulties and/or successes. The prospective teachers were also asked to reflect upon how the session went in general, what they learned from the process, and whether they would do anything differently the next time. The journals, along with copies of the students' drafts, were submitted for instructor comments. This exchange effectively served as a form of a dialogue journal, the content of which provided the basis for some subsequent class discussions and activities.



### **The Teacher Journals**

Each teacher submitted a total of 5 to 7 journal entries, each ranging from 1 to 4 pages in length. These were accompanied with copies of the students' essays with the teachers' written feedback. The journals reflect different ways in which the various student-teacher pairs negotiated the use of their sessions and how each teacher's instruction was tailored to meet the needs of his/her student. While some pairs revised one assignment multiple times, others chose to work on a new piece of writing for each session. Likewise, some pairs found e-mail a useful tool for communicating ideas and for giving and receiving feedback, whereas other pairs remained faithful to the traditional paper medium to perform these activities. While some teachers chose to extensively discuss organization and content of the students' papers, others were more interested in addressing problems with the mechanics of writing, such as grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Although the journals reflect these important differences in the ways in which the various pairs interacted, they also share some striking commonalities, particularly in areas where the teachers wrote about adjusting their expectations about improving student writing and discovering themselves as writers.

### **Adjusting Expectations about Improving Student Writing**

Research on teacher reflection through journal writing has documented changes in teachers' beliefs about learning and teaching during teacher preparation courses (e.g. Dart *et al.*, 1998). These serve as evidence of teachers' development as learners and teachers and often include statements on teachers' initial expectations and how they are modified as a result of a specific experience. In this study, nearly every teacher expressed

frustration with their failure to observe immediate improvements in their students' writing. This frustration appears largely to have stemmed from setting unrealistic goals.

For example, one teacher wrote in her fourth entry:

“Even though I have been spending a lot of time with him discussing his main problems with writing in English, his writing does not seem to have improved....While I was reading his 5<sup>th</sup> writing, Unforgettable Moment, I became somewhat disappointed and helpless. Because of the ambiguity of his sentences, I could hardly understand what he tried to tell me. Even though he and I discussed organization and rhetoric last session for such a long time, he still showed the same problems this time.” (Susan) <sup>2</sup>

Here, Susan seems to expect that if she spends a significant amount of time discussing a specific problem with a student, the student's subsequent drafts should not show the same problem. Consequently, she was disappointed because this expectation was not met. Later in the same entry, Susan modified her initial expectations by stating that improvements in writing can take some time to surface, something that she probably had known as a language teacher:

“Even though the process of my tutee's writing in its improvement is invisible and quite slow, I want to strongly believe that he is in the process of learning and improving his writing.” (Susan)

Susan's subsequent journal entries show that her revised expectations are eventually met. Here, she is able to celebrate small but significant improvements in the organization of her student's writing, despite the persistent existence of grammatical errors:

"In terms of organization and clarity, among all his other writings, my tutee's last writing became my favorite. Most of all, I felt so happy to see some improvement in his writing. Even though he still has problems with verb tense, word order, some awkward expressions, and mechanics, I did not have any problem understanding what he wanted to express through the writing." (Susan)

Another teacher wrote about a change in his belief about his role as a writing teacher. In his fourth entry, Richard discusses the importance of helping students understand the process of writing, rather than requiring them to produce a "perfect" paper:

"Somehow I thought that it was too bad not to be able to work on Christine's paper for a couple more tutoring sessions. However, after reviewing the "final product" and discussing what the last 3 sessions had provided in terms of discovery of oneself and improvement in expressing oneself in writing, I soon realized that the most important thing was not for Christine to write a perfect paper, but rather to rejoice about the fact that she was now (more) aware of the writing process, and she could use this process on her own in the future." (Richard)

On the whole, the process of first setting a goal, then evaluating and modifying it leads prospective teachers to realize that helping others improve their writing can be a long and painstaking process, the results of which may not surface until some time later.

### **Teachers Discovering Themselves as Writers**

One of the major advantages of prospective writing teachers' maintenance of a journal is the increased awareness of their own writing style and habits. In writing up descriptions of personal experiences, the writer knows that one's own experiences are also the possible experiences of others. This seems especially true when one attempts to understand the writing processes that others go through by first evaluating one's own writing processes. For example, one teacher wrote about his discovery of aspects about his writing that he did not notice before:

“On a personal level, I evaluated a piece of my own writing and saw a lot of room for improvement that was not evident to me before. I can be wordy and wander afield from my primary subject. I can start strong and end weak. I am not a master at the craft of writing but I can be if I take the time to redraft, evaluate critically, and revise often enough. The lessons from this writing are lifetime lessons; to be applied long after this class is over.” (Tom)

Another teacher wrote about procrastination, one of the problems with writing that her student struggled with. Their discussion on procrastination appears to have enabled this teacher to examine her own writing habits and to reaffirm her view that writing a good essay requires a great deal of effort:

“Incidentally, before handing me the paper, she said that she was running late and had to write quickly. This spawned a conversation about procrastination – something I can relate to. We agreed that lots of time is needed to make a paper good.” (Eva)

Another teacher attempted to understand her Japanese-speaking student’s experiences in ESOL writing by reflecting on her experience as a learner of Japanese. While admitting that the problems that her student was having were common for all writers, Tammy is also able to empathize with additional difficulties ESOL students experience from simply having to write in another language:

“She says that her two big problems are connecting many short sentences into one long one, and completing her ideas. She gets halfway through a sentence she is trying to write and gets stuck. I reassured her that this is a common problem for all writers, though as a former student of Japanese, I could understand her frustration with the many differences between writing in English and in the Asian language. She also named things such as being able to tell the difference between “that” and “which”. I told her that I had only learned the difference a few months ago, and I’m a 26 year-old native speaker! But again, I could understand the desire to learn a language completely and perfectly.” (Tammy)

### **Value of the Journals for Teacher Educators**

The journal entries enabled the methods course instructor to perform an ongoing needs assessment of the teacher candidates and determine issues that needed to be

discussed in class. For example, one teacher's experience with a student who refused to be tutored by a nonnative English speaker was brought up to the whole class for discussion. The teachers engaged in a lively discussion on the advantages and disadvantages of being a native or nonnative English-speaking teacher. The teachers also discussed ways in which social factors such as age and gender may influence teacher-student relationships in different cultures. Although being unwanted by her student was at first a distressing experience for the teacher in question, she contentedly reported later that her new student valued the input of both native and non-native English teachers. The journals in other ways revealed the need to make the expectations of conferencing more explicit to students being tutored. For example, two teachers had to be assigned to new students because their original students simply wanted their grammar errors corrected and had little interest in learning ways to improve their overall writing abilities. Thus, a decision was made subsequently by the methods course instructor to explain expectations to students both orally and in writing before they sign up to obtain help with their writing.

## **Conclusion**

This article presented a case for making individual conferencing and subsequent reflection through journal writing an integral part of L2 writing teacher education. The writing conference actively engages both the writing tutor and the student, each continuously evaluating himself/herself as a writer. For prospective teachers of writing, it provides useful opportunities to adapt and evaluate course knowledge in practical teaching situations, especially when reflection on the experience is encouraged through journal writing. By reflecting on their conferencing experiences, prospective teachers can

observe how one learns to write in another language, develop more realistic expectations about improving student writing, and become increasingly aware of themselves as writers. As a result, prospective teachers develop their skills not only as writing teachers, but also as writers and learners. When undertaken in the context of teacher preparation, the teacher educator also contributes to and benefits from this experience.

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**Word Count:** 3,451

### **Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> Not all of the teachers were comfortable discussing specific grammar issues however. Some teachers, especially native English speakers who have never taken a course on English grammar, felt that they were inadequately equipped to explain grammatical points to ESOL writers. Those teachers were referred to a number of widely used grammar references for L2 writers of English (e.g. Raimes, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> All teacher and student names are pseudonyms. All excerpts are used with permission.