

HOW TO TEACH EFL/ESL WRITING: A BASIC GUIDE FOR THAI TEACHERS

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ABSTRACT

This is an article about teaching writing. More specifically, it is an article about teaching writing in English to people who speak another language. This makes the job of the EFL writing teacher even more difficult than that of the native language writing teacher: not only must she deal with the students' fears towards facing a blank sheet of paper or a blank computer screen; she must also deal with the students' fears of composing their thoughts in a language that they are not comfortable with. In this situation, both the teacher and the student often have to adjust their thinking about what it means to write in English as a second language. It is the purpose of this article to help with that adjustment.

Introduction

Writing is like many activities in many ways. It requires focus and concentration to do it well. Just as you need to think about what you are doing when you are playing tennis (watch the ball!), you need to block out thoughts about other things and concentrate on the ideas you are attempting to present in your writing. Writing is sustained thinking, and it takes the reader from the beginning of an idea to its end, at least the end that the writer has chosen. As Ong (1998) has suggested, "true writing...is a representation of ...words that someone says or is imagined to say." The flip side of

writing then is reading. The writer creates the narration of an idea and it is then available to the reader to experience this same "narration." It is this shared world that is at the bottom of the writing process, and it is this goal that the student must have in mind as she sits down to write.

However, this world is not achieved all at once. Ideas have contours and dimensions, and it is the writer's job to capture those contours and dimensions as accurately as possible so that the reader can have the same or a similar experience. And this is one of the hallmarks of writing: that it allows us to be accurate and specific in the representation

of our ideas. Capturing these ideas and then stringing them together into a text requires attempting to put these ideas on paper and then re-reading them to check to see if they are what we really want to say and to check for what comes next in the narration. Students should be made aware of this fundamental nature of writing. If they feel that they are supposed to get it all right on the first try then they have a false idea about how writing is carried out by everybody, including professionals. If a professional writing gets all of her ideas right on the first try, then she is probably writing a very short piece.

Most notably, for a second language writer there is the potential fear of making mistakes. Much has been made about this in the literature on this topic. In our classes, we have always found this fear to be relative to the attitude of the teacher to those errors. The students understand that errors in language use are a normal part of the learning process; but what is more important, they understand that writing, working with our ideas in a two-dimensional context like typing at the computer, is separate from linguistic competence. It is true that particularly at a low level of competence, the student is going to be much more focused on language use than on ideas. But it has been our experience in both teaching writing and writing in a second language that after a certain stage of language development the writer is able to switch her focus from the mode of expression (language) to the ideas that need to be expressed.

This can be achieved in the L2 writing class in a variety of ways. For example, the teacher can encourage the student to have a more *playful attitude toward her ideas in early drafts* and then think about the

presentation of those ideas to the reader in later drafts. The teacher can divide her attention in reading her students' essays, first looking at the basic structure and presentation of the ideas and then looking at them in detail. This will of course help the student to view her writing process in the same way, concentrating on ideas first and then on form. It is true that this division between ideas and expression is never completely achieved in the writing process. Indeed, our ideas *are* the form that they eventually take on paper. Nevertheless, it is possible for the student to overcome some of the difficulties involved in finding and expressing ideas in a second language. For example, lack of vocabulary has been cited as the main cause of the interruption of the writing process. If you have the idea and your writing is slowed up by not being able to find the right word or phrase, make a note of it in your writing (in English or in your native language) and move on with your thoughts. Or if you set out to talk about one idea and another idea seems to be pulling your awareness more, then follow that idea and return to the other one later. This will make your writing stronger. You can always go back to the other idea and you can always move the ideas in your writing around to suit your purposes. The student needs to understand that this is what writing is about, and it is the teacher's job to guide her students through this messy, enjoyable process.

One of the other things that the teacher should do to help her students as much as possible is to have them *write as much as possible*. At some point during the writing process, the student and teacher must decide when it is time to go on to another essay. Certainly if the student feels the need to say more or if her ideas are not satisfactorily

expressed, then it would likely benefit the student to continue with the essay in terms of language development, writing development, or both. The time that is spent on an essay will also depend of course upon the length of the essay. Nevertheless, the teacher and the student will develop a sense of when the benefits of writing a new essay outweigh the benefits of continuing to work with their current project. Our rule of thumb has been the following. If the student and teacher feel that the essay has basically said what the author intended, then it is time to move on to another essay, despite the existence of surface level errors that do not significantly interfere with communication. In terms of second language learning and writing, for example, it takes a great deal of time for learners to acquire the habit of using correct forms of words and in the appropriate situations. Differences between prepositions are confusing, not to mention the most mercurial parts of speech and the article. The teacher, therefore, needs to develop a sense of what is important and what is less important so that the student can move on to new essays and new ideas. In other words, the teacher needs to prioritize her response to her students' work so that the student can get as much valuable practice as possible. This may come from re-working a particularly difficult passage or cluster of ideas, or it may come from undertaking the first draft of a new essay.

Finally, the teacher should structure the class so that she can spend as much time as possible with her students. This does not mean seeing each student for an hour a day talking about the implications of their ideas. On the contrary, it means seeing each student for short periods of time but frequently. As we shall see in section 5, with minimal practice the teacher can read

an essay for a grasp of how coherent the student's essay is. A holistic rating of an essay for the TOEFL test takes only a matter of one or two minutes. If problems of a rhetorical nature exist in the essay, the teacher can quickly point out these problems. On the other hand, if the ideas hold together well and are sufficiently developed and specified, the instructor can move on to issues of clarity, such as correctness of grammatical forms. By emphasizing writing as a process of going through several drafts, the teacher can visit with the student frequently during that entire process, making comments on different aspects of the work at different, appropriate times.

The most important thing for a writing teacher to keep in mind is that writing is an act of thought: thinking as we write and then thinking again as we review our material for deeper insight and greater clarity. The lessons in this article are intended to help the student achieve that insight and clarity as well as enjoy the road to getting there.

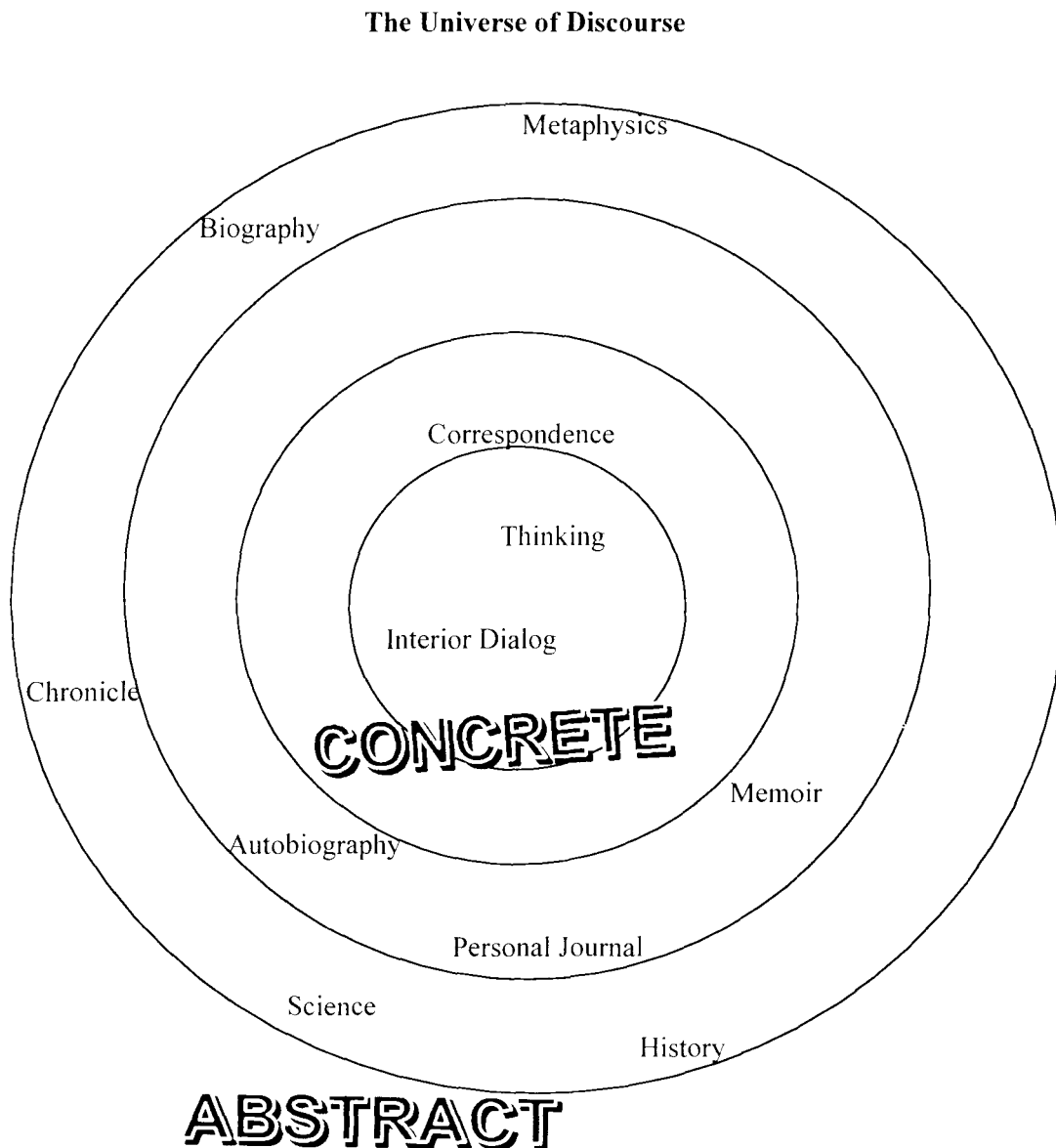
THE FOUNDATION

I. Writing is Thinking

The first thing that we must think about when beginning to teach writing is what we mean by writing. Is helping students to learn how to make a grocery list teaching writing? Some people could argue that it is. After all, it does involve "writing." Does teaching writing involve helping students to find just the right metaphor in English that will suit their feeling, as is the case with poetry? Again, some would argue that it is. Before we think about how best to teach ESL writing, we should spend some time thinking about what we mean by writing.

In fact, writing involves thinking. As Moffett (1987) suggested many years ago in *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, it might help us to situate in our minds what we mean by teaching writing by thinking of the writing process on a continuum, one that begins with rumination and thinking to oneself, to organizing our ideas in the

clearest fashion possible so that we can reach the widest audience possible. The following graphic may help you get a clearer picture of the progression of writing types from the more personal, concrete type of writing to the abstract writing that attempts to eliminate the personality of the author as much as possible.



Writing at one end of this spectrum is sometimes just the hint of an idea or a feeling. At the other end, it is a thought

spelled out in all its complexity and order. What holds this continuum together is thought.

One of the problems that the beginning writer faces is the fear that he or she must somehow have the thought before putting fingers to keyboard. It is easy to understand why students come by this misunderstanding. When they read something that has been written by another person and published by still another person, they do not realize all of the work that has gone into the work of writing, not just the beginning writer but ALL WRITERS. In reality, writing is a tool for thinking and not just for recording our thoughts. If students do not understand this, and if teachers do not impart this essential idea to their students, they will never develop the skill of writing, and worse, they will never experience the joy that comes from coming upon an unexpected turn in your mind. As Zamel (1982) has said, "writing is a continuing attempt to discover what it is one want[s] to say," and that writing "is the process of exploring one's thought and learning from the act of writing itself what these thoughts are."

This idea of writing as thinking and as a process of shaping our thoughts is the core idea about writing around which all others circle.

II. Two Writing Selves in One Mind

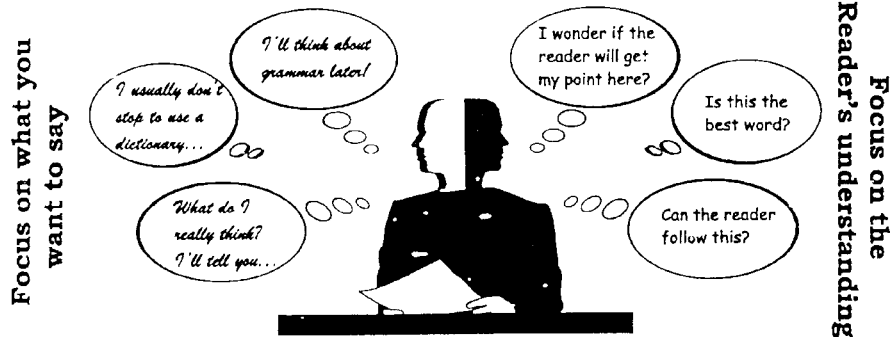
Writing is a process of expressing our ideas, and sometimes expressing our feelings. For the most part, however, writing means writing in school, and writing in school is by and large a matter of explaining where we stand on an issue, what we think about it and what others think about it. We saw in the last section that writing is really a mode of thinking. What we say at the end of an essay is most often not exactly what we thought we were going to say at the beginning. And sometimes, our first and last thoughts on an issue are very

different. This is the essential power of writing. And to be an effective teacher of writing, whether you are teaching first or second language writers, students need to be given the time, and support, to use this characteristic of writing to their best advantage. This means that the writing process has to be conceived by teachers and students alike as a thought process carried out in stages, even though "stages" is only a crude metaphor for the kind of thinking and re-thinking process that writing entails. This idea has a couple of important implications for the writing teacher.

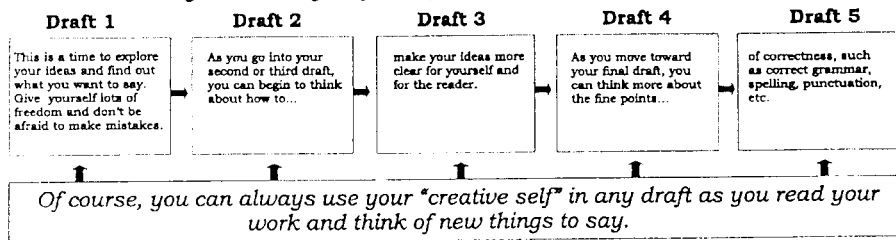
Several years ago, a famous American writer and teacher of writing, Donald Murray (1982), said that the writer should conceive of herself as having two writers within: the *creative self* that plays with ideas with abandon and without necessarily thinking about where those thoughts will lead; and the *editor* whose main concern is with how the reader is going to interpret her ideas.

This idea of two selves within and the concept of writing as a process go hand in hand since the writer can learn to trust the creative self when it is appropriate to grapple with ideas without over-concerning herself with grammatical correction or word choice in early drafting states, for example, and the editing self when that focus is more called for while finalizing the presentation of ideas for a reader. Once again, the distinction, although a useful tool for relieving the stress that can come with writing, is academic in the sense that stages and selves continually alternate and even merge throughout the process. The following graphic, depicting the two writing selves at work, can be reproduced and handed out to students for a visual representation of the writing process.

Two Writing Selves in Each of Us



Use both selves when you need them, but don't let your editing self interfere with your creative self!



Writing has been characterized by many scholars as a “recursive” process. This means that writing offers the reader the possibility of reading what she has written again and again in order to decide what direction the essay will take. Since writing possesses this characteristic, the job of the creative self and the editing self is never at an end. It may be that in the beginning of an essay the writer will completely abandon herself to her thoughts and feelings without concern for order and what the reader is going to think. But it is also true that the writer going over a draft can bring that same “self” into play as she adds new ideas that can give more depth to what she is trying to communicate. There is a fairly constant back and forth between the creative self and the editing self throughout the writing process, and this is one of the most important lessons that the writing teacher can give to her students. Without this

understanding, the writer will be lost in the beginning because her thoughts are tripping over the idea of what the reader is going to think; and in the end the writer will have failed because she did not give herself the freedom to rethink her position on an issue.

III. How Do I Get Started?

The following is a conversation that actually took place between two English teachers (an experienced writing teacher and an inexperienced writing teacher) in the elevator before class.

Experienced Writing Teacher (Exp): “You look tired.”

Inexperienced Writing Teacher (Inexp): “I am. I’ve got to figure out what to do with this class.”

Exp: “What do you mean?”

Inexp: “I take my students’ papers home every night and spend hours reading them

and marking them. I don't know how long I can keep on with this. How do you do it?"

Exp: "Easy. I haven't taken papers home in years."

Inexp: "Yea, sure!" (smiling)

Exp: "No. I really mean it. I do all of my reading and make all of my comments in class. This saves me a tremendous amount of time, but that's not the best reason."

Inexp: "What do you mean?"

Exp: "By reading the students' essays in class, I can speak to them at the same time I am making written comments. That way, I can be sure that they understand what I am saying, and I can be sure that I understand what they are trying to communicate in their papers. If I mark their papers at home, they often do not understand my comment and I sometimes don't even remember what I was thinking."

Inexp: "Yes, I know what you mean! (laughing). But how can you handle so many students at the same time?"

Exp: "That's not as difficult as it seems. Come to my office. I'll explain."

This section is an explanation of the conversation that might have followed. It is the secret of managing the writing class. And it is the secret of becoming the best writing teacher you can be. Let's start with the first day. The beginning teacher of writing who is convinced that she wants to help the largest number of students as frequently as possible, and when they most need it, is faced with as many fears about teaching writing as her students are about writing, particularly on the first day. But it is really not at all difficult. It just takes a little practice and being confident that as a teacher, we have a realistic vision of the writing process.

How to get started is major concern for the writing teachers and students alike. Students do not know where to begin recording the maelstrom of ideas swimming in their minds (if they are at that point in the writing process yet!); and teachers are afraid of how to respond to the question that they most fear from the student, "What should I write about?" thinking that it is her job to make the writing process as painless as possible for the student. But the truth is that writing is by and large an activity of the individual and of the individual's mind. The teacher can coax ideas from the student and help with the expression of those ideas throughout the writing process—but it is the student who is ultimately going to bear the joy and responsibility for thinking. There are basically three areas from which the teacher and student can draw from for ideas for writing: conversation, reading, and prompts.

If you are teaching in a language program in which language skills are separated, then you are faced with the situation of how to stimulate ideas in the writing class where it is difficult to find time to teach writing and at the same time engage in the kind of in-depth conversation and/or reading that would lead to the kinds of questions that result in good essays. The way in which most experienced teachers respond to this dilemma is through the use of prompts. Types of prompts can be categorized according to the graph presented in the first section. If you want your students to engage in writing on personal topics, you could use the following prompts.

Focus on Personal Views

- Take a walk in memory through the setting where you grew up. Observe the details of the landscape, the weather,

objects and people. End your walk at a place that had special meaning for you. Show your feelings for this place by describing it and what you did there. You may want to compare or contrast that setting to where you live now.

- What was your birth order in relation to your brothers and sisters, or were you an only child? What effect do you feel your placement in the family had on your life?
- What is the single most important thing you gained from your early schooling? Did a teacher or other adult or your peers influence this knowledge?
- When did you first have an inkling of what you might like to be in adult life in terms of vocation or role? Where were the significant turning points in working toward this goal or in redirecting your aims? Do you feel you made the right choices along the way, or would you select other options if you could relive your life?
- Write about something you used to believe in which you no longer believe. Was there a specific incident that altered your belief?
- How important were nature or physical surroundings to you when you were young? How did your family spend their vacation? How did vacation time contrast to your life at home? What breaks from routine life do you now enjoy?
- Who were your closest friends in childhood? What did you have in common with them? How important do you now think friendship is? You could also write about a pet that was your best friend.
- Write about the day you left home for the United States. How did your family

respond to your leaving? How did you feel?

- Have there been important mentors in your life? How did they influence you? In later years, did you outgrow the philosophy of your mentor?
- Is there a specific incident in your life when you defied your family's expectations of you? What was the cost of that defiance?
- What is the hardest choice you have ever had to make? What changes did the decision effect in your life? Do you feel you made the right choice?
- Write about something you know how to do very well. Describe the process clearly so that a reader could follow your directions and accomplish the task.
- Write about an event that occurred during the past few days that stands out in your mind.

You may, on the other hand, want your students to write on topics that deal less with the author's feelings and more with her position on certain issues, like the following.

Focus on Issues

- What do you think is the main reason that so many people are attending college or university today? Use specific reasons and examples to support your answer.
- Which do you think is more important, the knowledge you gain from experience or the knowledge you gain from articles? Why?
- How do you think television is changing the world? Use reasons and specific examples to support your answer.
- Which do you prefer, living in a big city or a small town? Use specific reasons

and specific examples to support your answer.

- You are a manager and are thinking about hiring a new employee. One has a lot of experience and little education, and the other has a lot of education and little experience. Which person would you choose and why? Give specific reasons for your choice.
- “Never give up your dreams.” Explain why you agree or disagree with this philosophy, and provide specific reasons and examples for your choice.
- Which would you prefer, working for a large company or a small company and why? Give specific reasons for your choice.
- Some people say that in their country people “work to live,” while others say that they “live to work.” Which best describes your own country and why? Give specific examples for your discussion.
- You are meeting an old friend who has a child of 7 and you would like to give the child a gift that will make a difference in his/her life. What gift would you give him or her and why? Give specific reasons for your choice.

If you are teaching writing as a discrete activity, then, your first day activity will be to get your students writing through some kind of prompt. The written section of the International TOEFL test is 30 minutes long, and in that period of time the student is expected to take a stance on an issue presented in the prompt and to respond with a certain position and examples that support that position. It is a reasonable expectation then to have your students all complete the first draft of an essay within one class

period. They can then take it home and type it up for the next day’s class.

IV. The Nature of the Quick Response: the hub of the writing class

What comes next is the machine that keeps the writing class going: conferencing. Students will come to class with a typed draft in hand, like soldiers advancing on an outnumbered enemy. What is the teacher going to do with all of these essays? The answer is, read them with each student. And what are all the other students going to do while the teacher is occupied with each student? The answer is simple: write another essay. While the students are busy drafting a new essay, the teacher can call each student over to the corner where she can read through and respond to the writer’s essay. How to respond is what we will talk about in this section.

(Talk about holistic scoring and the distinction between global and local levels of a draft, the fluency first movement, the form/content controversy—all of which support the idea of a quick reading of many drafts.) The quick response is the oil that will keep your writing class running smoothly.

Some of our best ideas come from unusual sources. For example, some of the best ideas for responding quickly and efficiently to a student’s paper come from the area of holistic scoring. The Test of Written English, part of the International TOEFL test is perhaps most widely known so we will take a look at that and see how it might help us focus on our students’ work.

The scoring for the Test of Written English is broken down into 6 different levels, ranging from 1, where a paper “demonstrates incompetence in writing, to 6,

where a paper demonstrates clear competence on the rhetorical and syntactic levels.”

**Test of Written English (TWE)
Scoring Guide**

6 Demonstrates clear competence in writing on both the rhetorical and syntactic levels, though it may have occasional errors.

A paper in this category

- effectively addresses the writing task
- is well organized and well developed
- uses clearly appropriate details to support a thesis or illustrate ideas
- displays consistent facility in the use of language
- demonstrates syntactic variety and appropriate word choice

5 Demonstrates competence in writing on both the rhetorical and syntactic levels, though it will probably have occasional errors.

A paper in this category

- may address some parts of the task more effectively than others
- is generally well organized and developed
- uses details to support a thesis or illustrate an idea
- displays facility in the use of language
- demonstrates some syntactic variety and range of vocabulary

4 Demonstrates minimal competence in writing on both the rhetorical and syntactic levels.

A paper in this category

- addresses the writing topic adequately but may slight parts of the task
- is adequately organized and developed

--uses some details to support a thesis or illustrate an idea

--demonstrates adequate but possibly inconsistent facility with syntax and usage

--may contain some errors that occasionally obscure meaning

3 Demonstrates some developing competence in writing, but it remains flawed on either the rhetorical or syntactic level, or both.

A paper in this category may reveal one or more of the following weaknesses:

- inadequate organization or development
- inappropriate or insufficient details to support or illustrate generalizations
- a noticeably inappropriate choice of words or word forms
- an accumulation of errors in sentence structure and/or usage

2 Suggests incompetence in writing.

A paper in this category is seriously flawed by one or more of the following weaknesses:

- serious disorganization or underdevelopment
- little or no detail, or irrelevant specifics
- serious and frequent errors in sentence structure or usage
- serious problems with focus

1 Demonstrates incompetence in writing.

A paper in this category

- may be incoherent
- may be underdeveloped
- may contain severe and persistent writing errors

As you can see from the above guide, the focus that runs throughout the levels is

on rhetoric and syntax. It is this double focus that can help the teacher tremendously when pursuing methods of responding in a meaningful way to her student's paper.

For example, we say in the beginning of this article that it helps the student most when she is encouraged to view the writing process in rough "stages": early stages for generating ideas and exploring avenues for the development of her ideas; later stages for switching her concentration to how the reader is going to view and interpret her ideas. Although it is quite possible for the teacher to focus on both the rhetorical and syntactic levels at the same time, it might be best for the student if the teacher gave most attention to the structure of the essay when looking at the first draft. If the student were writing an essay that focused on an issue, as the Test of Written English encourages, questions like the following might be asked:

- Does the essay focus on a single issue, or does it digress in places without returning to the main topic?
- Is the detail that the author uses to support her ideas relevant to the stated topic? Is there enough detail offered to support her position or the generalizations that she is making in the essay?
- Does the author develop her ideas adequately?

As you can see, these questions seem to turn on two main areas of writing competence, organization and development. *A reading that will give the teacher an answer to these questions should take about a minute.* At which point the teacher can take a few moments to point out any weaknesses that she sees to her student. If the essay does seem to be well organized and the ideas adequately developed (See specific suggestions about how to carry this out in section five), the teacher can then move on to the area of syntax (See section six).¹ This will typically take more time, particularly since it is a good idea to create a dialog with the student as you are moving through the text. On this second reading of the text, the teacher can point out places in the text where the ideas are unclear. It is common in this situation for a student to be able to communicate orally what she meant and failed to express. We often tell students in this situation that they can simply write what they just said, or we give them examples of a couple of sentences that express their ideas clearly.

Many writing teachers are in favor of using an analytic grid that helps the teacher and the student focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the essay. The following grid was made by Mr. Ho-jung Yu and adapted from Smith, 1991.

¹ It should be pointed out that the distinction between reading on the rhetorical and syntactic levels is pretty much an academic distinction, even though in most cases it is possible to carry out this kind of separation in reading. Problems can occur if the sentences are so unclear that the reader is not able to have much of an idea what the student is getting at. In that case, meaning on the sentence level needs to be clarified before judgments concerning the flow of ideas can be made. However, it has been our experience that beyond a beginning level of writing, particularly in terms of language acquisition, it is indeed possible to carry out a reading for flow (rhetorical clarity) without much difficulty or time constraint, as we saw with the holistic scoring above.

Content	The paper is focused on a particular subject.			
	1	2	3	4
	The purpose of the paper is clear to its readers.			
	1	2	3	4
Organization	The introduction gets the reader's attention and prepares the reader for what is coming.			
	1	2	3	4
	There is clear transition from one idea to the next.			
	1	2	3	4
	Individual paragraphs are coherent.			
	1	2	3	4
	All details develop the main idea of the whole or each paragraph.			
	1	2	3	4
Correctness	The conclusion draws the paper to a close, summarizing main points, reemphasizing the paper's purpose, etc.			
	1	2	3	4
	Mechanics correct: accurate punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and grammar.			
	1	2	3	4
	Words are used accurately and appropriately.			
	Sentences are complete and correct.			
	1	2	3	4

* 1: great 2: good 3: fair 4: growth area

General Comment:

There are many potential advantages to using a grid such as this. For example, such analytic representations can help the student a great deal in bringing to mind the types of things she ought to be looking at particularly during the re-write process. On an even more practical level, an analytic grid that conceptualizes the reading of an essay in this way can help remind the student of items that were discussed during the conference. This is an especial plus when working with ESL students, where English is the only means of communication.

Whether you choose to use an analytic aid like this or not, there are a variety of positive aspects to this kind of double,

rhetoric/syntax conference. In the first place, it makes the writer aware of the elements that constitute a good essay. At the same time, it discourages her from focusing too much on any single aspect of the essay. Writing in English as a second or foreign language is difficult and intimidating, and it is extremely helpful if the student learns the skill of looking at her writing holistically: that is, look at both what is working well and what is not working so well in her writing and then attempt to make the appropriate adjustment in future drafts.

Another important characteristic of this kind of reading, particularly in terms of our present discussion on how to manage the classroom, concerns the time that it takes to

carry out this kind of reading/conference. Five minutes should be sufficient for an evaluation of organization and development and for a brief discussion of the major errors in syntax. The teacher can then send the student back to her desk or the computer room to make adjustments in her essay, or begin a new essay. Once a rhythm such as this is created in the class, the teacher need not worry about what the students are doing in the classroom: they are writing! (See section 8 for a discussion of alternate classroom scenarios.)

V. Reading for flow: clarity on the rhetorical level

Even though the words flow and clarity are perhaps the first that comes to the teacher's mind in English when thinking about why her student's prose is not doing what the author intended, they are metaphors and do much in the way of helping the teacher help her student. A more precise vocabulary is needed so that the teacher can specify more precisely what is not working in the prose and why. This is what we are going to talk about in this section.

We said in the last section that a quick read on the part of the teacher for weaknesses in organization and development should take only a very short period of time. Knowing what to look for, and how to explain it when you find it, can help a great deal. Let's take a look at the following essay.

Prompt: Some people feel that smoking should be allowed in public places, while others do not. How do you feel about this issue? Be sure to provide reasons for your opinion.

It is believed that there should be a prohibition of smoking in public places. For several years now the public places in

Slovenia have seen the banning of smoking. People who are seen smoking are made to pay quite a large fine (in terms of the Slovenian monetary system). Complete agreement with this new regulation is recommended.

Agreement with this law is not only restricted to non-smokers. The prohibition of smoking in public places should be encouraged for many reasons, not only in Slovenia but in the viewpoint of many people, all over the world. Most of these reasons have a health relationship.

It is a commonly held belief that smoking can be the cause of many dangerous health situations, but it is just coming to the world's awareness that smoking can cause health dangers even if one is just in the proximity of one who is smoking. Many individuals dying has been the result of people's smoking and here in the United States the price is being paid by many companies for the allowance and encouragement of smoking. A person contracting cancer from someone else smoking is sufficient reason for the public prohibition of smoking.

Other factors than the health aspect should be taken into consideration as to whether to continue the allowance of smoking in public places, such as the safety factor. The causing of fires every year is a result of carelessness with cigarettes. Many people are seen in my country and in the United States throwing their cigarettes away with carelessness when they are no longer needed. This act should be prohibited in the first place because the world is not for this purpose. Another reason for the prohibition of this is due to the fact that starting a fire could result in the hurting of someone.

In sum, the prohibition of smoking in public places should be allowed by everyone.

It is clear to the reader that the essay is not very clear, even though the sentence seems to be grammatical. Just telling a student that her essay is not clear, however, is not very helpful. Now look at the following re-write of the above essay.

I believe that smoking should not be allowed in public places. For several years now smoking has not been allowed in public places in Slovenia. If you are caught doing so, you can be made to pay quite a large fine (at least in terms of the money in my country). I completely agree with this new law.

It is not only because I am a non-smoker that I agree with the law. There are many reasons that smoking should be prohibited in public places, not only in my country but in my opinion all over the world. Most of these reasons have to do with health.

Everyone knows that smoking is very dangerous for you health, but what many people are just learning now is that smoking is dangerous for your health even if you are not smoking but just near someone who does. Many people have died from smoking, and here in the United States many companies are paying the price for allowing and even encouraging people to smoke. If a person can get cancer from someone else who is smoking, then this is certainly reason enough that smoking should be prohibited in public places.

In addition to the health aspect of smoking, there is another factor that should be considered when thinking about whether people should be allowed to smoke in public places: the factor of safety. Many fires are caused every year by people who are careless with their cigarettes. I have seen lots of people driving in my country and in the United States just throw their cigarettes out

the car window when they are finished. They shouldn't do this in the first place because the world is not a big garbage pile. They also shouldn't do it because the still lit cigarette could start a fire and hurt someone.

In sum, I feel that the prohibition of smoking in public places is a good thing for everyone.

This one seems to be very different, but how can we account for the difference; and more importantly, how can we explain the difference to our students? The answer lies in the fact that the prose in the first example is overly abstract, while that of the second is much more concrete. The way to correct this is by having the student concentrate, as Williams (1990) suggests, on creating a tight, concrete relationship between subjects and verbs (we will discuss the relevance of this on the sentence level in the next section) and the topics of the sentences and their actions. Let's look at the first paragraph of the first essay.

It is believed that there should be a prohibition of smoking in public places. For several years now the public places in Slovenia have seen the banning of smoking. People who are seen smoking are made to pay quite a large fine (in terms of the Slovenian monetary system). Complete agreement with this new regulation is recommended.

The first sentence states that "it is believed" that there should be prohibition of smoking in public places but it not clear to the reader who is doing the believing. "[T]hat there should be a prohibition of smoking in public places" is simply a clumsier way of saying, as the author does in the re-write, that "smoking should not be allowed in public

places.” In the first instance, a passive construction was used where an active one would have been much better in terms of letting the reader know who is doing the believing; and in the second instance, a noun phrase was used where a verb would have conveyed the relationships between the subject and verb, or in this case, between real topic of the sentence and the action of that topic, much more clearly. In the next sentence, the author says that “public places...have seen the banning of smoking.” What exactly does this mean? Wouldn’t it be much better simply to create a more concrete relationship between the subject and the verb and say that “smoking has not been allowed in public places?”

The second version is more readable because the relationships between the subjects and verbs are more immediately understandable. Perhaps even more important to the tightness of the second version, however, relates to the relationships between the “topics” and the actions that those topics describe, whether the relationship is literal or figurative. *What a sentence is about* is often not the grammatical subject of the sentence. In other words, the topic of a sentence is not necessarily its grammatical subject. Look at the following example from Williams’ article. (1990, p.50)

*As for **abortion**, it is not clear how the Supreme Court will rule.*

*In regard to **regulating religious cults**, we must proceed cautiously.*

As Williams (1990) points out, neither *abortion* nor *regulating religious cults* is the subject of its sentence. If we were to ask what these sentences are about, we would not say that they were about their grammatical subjects, “it” in the former case and “we” in

the latter. What the sentences are about are their psychological subjects or topics, abortion and regulating religious cults.

Let’s look at the topics and actions in the first version of the essay.

Prompt: Some people feel that smoking should be allowed in public places, while others do not. How do you feel about this issue? Be sure to provide reasons for your opinion.

*It is believed that **there should be a prohibition of smoking in public places**. For several years now the public places in Slovenia have seen the banning of smoking. **People who are seen smoking are made to pay quite a large fine (in terms of the Slovenian monetary system)**. **Complete agreement with this new regulation is recommended**.*

*Agreement with this law is not only **restricted to non-smokers**. The **prohibition of smoking in public places should be encouraged for many reasons, not only in Slovenia but in the viewpoint of many people, all over the world**. Most of these **reasons have a health relationship**.*

*It is a commonly held belief that **smoking can be the cause of many dangerous health situations, but it is just coming to the world’s awareness that smoking can cause health dangers even if one is just in the proximity of one who is smoking**. **Many individuals dying has been the result of people’s smoking and here in the United States the price is being paid by many companies for the allowance and encouragement of smoking**. A **person contracting cancer from someone else smoking is sufficient reason for the public prohibition of smoking**.*

Other factors than the health aspect should be taken into consideration as to

whether to continue the allowance of smoking in public places, such as the safety factor. **The causing of fires every year is a result of carelessness with cigarettes. Many people are seen in my country and in the United States throwing their cigarettes away with carelessness when they are no longer needed. This act should be prohibited in the first place because the world is not for this purpose. Another reason for the prohibition of this is due to the fact that starting a fire could result in the hurting of someone.**

*In sum, the **prohibition of smoking in public places should be allowed** by everyone.*

Now let's look at the topics and their actions in the second version.

*I believe that **smoking should not be allowed** in public places. For several years now **smoking has not been allowed** in public places in Slovenia. If you are caught doing so, **you can be made to pay quite a large fine** (at least in terms of the money in my country). **I completely agree** with this new law.*

*It is not only because I am a non-smoker that **I agree** with the law. There are many reasons that **smoking should be prohibited in public places, not only in my country but in my opinion all over the world. Most of these reasons have to do with health.***

*Everyone knows that **smoking is very dangerous** for your health, but what many people are just learning now is that **smoking is dangerous for your health** even if you are not smoking but just near someone who does. **Many people have died from smoking, and here in the United States many companies are paying the price** for allowing and even encouraging people to smoke. If a person can get cancer from someone else who is smoking, then this is certainly reason enough*

*that **smoking should be prohibited** in public places.*

*In addition to the health aspect of smoking, there is **another factor that should be considered** when thinking about whether people should be allowed to smoke in public places: the factor of safety. **Many fires are caused** every year by people who are careless with their cigarettes. **I have seen lots of people driving in my country and in the United States just throw their cigarettes out the car window when they are finished. They shouldn't do this** in the first place because the world is not a big garbage pile. **They also shouldn't do it** because the still lit cigarette could start a fire and hurt someone.*

*In sum, I feel that **the prohibition of smoking in public places is a good thing** for everyone.*

The reader gets the impression that the second version of the essay is clearer not only because the subjects and verbs express a more concrete relationship with each other, but also because the "string of topics" that is created in the second version allows the reader to follow the line of discussion more easily.

VI. Reading for clarity on the sentence level

In this section we are going to continue with our theme of subjects and verbs, for it is the relationship between the two that controls basic clarity on the sentence level and by implication, as we saw in the previous section, on the rhetorical level as well. Once you have looked at the student's essay for overall coherence and flow, you can go over the essay again and read it for this sentence-level clarity.

Look at the subjects and verbs (in bold) in this early-draft passage of a U.S. university application essay.

*While I was studying English at Indiana University, **I benefited** from many lessons from my teachers. **It was shown** by them that differences in language and culture should not be problematic for people who are interested in having their spirit and understanding shared. Other lessons were given to me by them. For example, it was shown to me again that the poor in my country should be educated. Thus, if I will be given the education that I need, the poor **people** in my country **will be provided** with the same education that was received by me from my generous teachers.*

As we saw in the previous section, this passage seems to be lifeless because of the preponderance of abstract phrasing and unnecessary passive constructions. In a conference with the student, she suggested that she thought the first sentence would be stronger if it ended with the topic that she intended to follow with in the second sentence. So she changed it to the following.

It is my good fortune to have recently received, a very nice message from my teachers here at Indiana University.

This sentence leads into the topic that will follow in the next sentence.

They have shown me that the difference between language and culture is not a problem for people who are intent upon sharing their spirit and understanding.

Once she made the decision to talk about the message that she had received from her

teachers, she was able to tighten up the relationship between the subjects and verbs and eliminate some of the passive constructions that weakened the meaning that she wanted to convey. Notice that she used a comma in the middle of the sentence to set off the idea of the message from her teachers, the idea that she will develop throughout the paragraph. The phrase “It is my good fortune to have recently received” is then placed in the first position of the sentence to further highlight the significance of the message, with the phrasing in the first draft tended to focus the reader’s attention on the benefit she received: “While I was studying English at Indiana University, **I benefited** from many lessons from my teachers.” From this new beginning, it was easy for her to create a “topic string” that would tie the ideas in the paragraph together. Here’s the final version.

*It is my good fortune to have recently received, a very nice message from my teachers here at Indiana University. **They have shown** me that the difference between language and culture is not a problem for people who are intent upon sharing their spirit and understanding. **They gave** me many valuable lessons, not only in terms of pure knowledge or theory but also in terms of general knowledge about life and particular life in the United States. **They have reminded** me of my original motivation: to help the poor and uneducated people in my country. Thus, if I am educated well enough to be specialist lawyer, **I will be able** to provide my knowledge to the people in my country who have not received, like me, this incredible chance from my generous teachers.*

The subject of clarity on the sentence level does not end with a discussion of subjects and verbs, however. Clarity consists

not only of conveying a concrete, understandable relationship between the main characters and actions of the narration²; it also consists in giving full expression to the ideas that lie nascent in our prose. Flower (1996) has called these words and phrases *codes*.³ Let's look at the following paragraph from a U.S. college application essay. According to her, they are "those expressions that might convey only a general or vague meaning to a reader, but which [represent] a large body of facts, experiences, or ideas for them"(p.74). She then goes on to say that they (the codes) should be treated "as one would any intuition—pushing it for its buried connections and turning those into a communicable idea" (p.74). This is a very eloquent way of saying that there are lots of passages in our students' papers that seem to us to be errors but for them they are ideas that need to be more fully developed for the reader. Flower (1972) suggests an exercise for the reader. Directions to student: circle any word in your essay that might seem vague or general to the reader but "which represent a large body of facts, experiences, or ideas for [you]." In response, the student circled the phrase "different perspective" in the following sentence:

*"By having these two jobs, I was able to see the business in an entirely **different perspective.**"*

In the student's rewritten version, she said: *"By following these two jobs, I was able to see the true relationship and relative importance of the various departments in the*

company. I could see their mutual dependence and how an event in one part of the firm can have an important effect on another."

The ideas in the second version are obviously a great deal more fleshed out than in the first. Flower's concept of "codes" or "loaded" words and phrases is extremely useful because it can be applied to almost any situation in which the writer has failed to communicate her idea to the reader. Let's look at the following excerpt from an early draft of the same essay above.

*I have been interested in law **for a long time.** As a little girl, I wanted to grow up to be a judge so I could **help people** in my country, Thailand. I have always disliked everything that was unfair and now I would like to help these people who are **don't have enough education.***

When asked in conference to circle the words (marked in bold here) that seemed to be loaded in meaning for her, she explained that by a "long time" she really meant since she was a little girl. And the thinking about this helped her to focus her memory and consequently make her prose more focused and concrete:

My dream to be a judge, and to be a good lawyer, began in first grade in Thailand. Almost all children have their favorite tale, and my favorite tale was the story about the fair and intelligent judge who helps the poor farmer who was going to lose

² We are using the term *narration* loosely here of course; nevertheless, it is no exaggeration to say that the subjects and verbs of even a scientific, expository essay constitute a story of sorts.

³ Terms like "codes," "writer and reader responsible prose," "implied author," "implied reader," "author-based prose," and so forth are the creations of some of the most creative individuals writing in the area of second and first language writing and we have to tip our hats to them for finding just the right term to describe what was in so many people's mind.

all of his farm to the crooked merchant according to an unfair contract. Since people sometimes lack the opportunity to be educated in my country, Thailand, they are often taken advantage of by bad persons. At that time, even though I was a little girl, I disliked everything that was unfair, and I promised myself to help these people.

In this version she says that her dream actually began in the first grade. This reminded her of a tale that she heard as a child that embodies for her what it means to be a judge or a lawyer and it fits well within her discussion of her childhood dream. She also felt that her phrase “don’t have enough education” was loaded in meaning for her so she ended up with a statement about how people who don’t have the privilege of an education can be taken advantage of in her country, allowing her to end the passage with the theme of help that runs through it. The point here is that with an approach to writing (conferencing) where the teacher is able to discuss with the student what is really on her mind, the teacher is able to help the student find areas ideas that need further development for the reader, or for the author herself. In the passage above, the author was interested in conveying the idea of her long-term interest in her field, and the image of a little girl struck by the meaning of a tale she heard is an image that easily finds a place in the reader’s mind. We like to call this exercise, the “tip of the iceberg” since the reader has let just the tip of her idea show through the surface of her prose. The teacher of English writing has to be patient, just as the person learning English has to be patient.

The teacher and student must frequently take a leap in their imagination in order to understand what the author is trying to communicate; and the student must not think that errors on the sentence level are a sign of no progress or a complete failure to communicate. In reality, it is more often the case that the student knows very well what she meant by a passage that was unclear or incompletely communicated to the reader.

VII. Group Work

We have seen that the method of writing instruction described above can save the teacher a great deal of time while at the same time maximizing the amount of writing that her students engage in.⁴ Scanning an essay for rhetorical clarity, following by a brief discussion of syntactic problems while sitting with the student will take only a few moments. Further, conferencing with students throughout the drafting process helps the teacher to meet the difficulties students are encountering head on. Very little “down time” occurs with this classroom scenario since everyone in the class is either rewriting a draft according to the instructor’s comments or beginning a new essay. In terms of language acquisition and the development of writing skill, the active class is the best class. (Krashen & Terrell, 1996)

Conferencing with individuals while the rest of the students are working independently is not the only way of structuring a class, however, even though this eliminates many of the problems and stress that EFL teachers voice about classes that are too large. Students can also work in groups. But what do they do? In asking this

⁴ Professor Adele Macgowan-Gilhooly at City College of New York has made a good case for having students write as much as possible in her 1991 essay, “Fluency First: reversing the traditional ESL sequence,” published in the *Journal of Basic Writing*.

question, we find ourselves in the middle of a debate that has been going on for years. For example, proponents of the group work claim that such work reinforces the idea of a reader and assists students' in becoming aware of the importance of how a reader will perceive and understand a text. This is certainly true. On the other hand, many instructors feel that it is counterproductive to have students who are still very much at the developmental stage of language learning criticize each others' work since they lack the expertise to make informed judgments concerning such aspects of clarity as word choice and grammatical accuracy.

Despite these caveats, however, group work can play an extremely positive role in the active writing class. In the process-oriented writing class, where the student writes several drafts and the teacher visits with students at all stages of writing, students will obviously have essays at various stages of completion. Each of these stages represents an opportunity for them to play the role of reader for other students. If you do not think that having students read each others' first drafts is a bad idea, they can read and discuss their work in progress or brainstorm for ideas. They can adopt the reading styles that the teacher has used in conferences and make suggestions concerning coherence and cohesion: how the ideas flow and relate to each other. Further, with the analytic grid in hand, students can be instructed to focus on certain elements of the essay.

On a first read for unity of concept and organization, you might have students make copies for all the others in a 3 or 4 person group. The author can read the essay aloud⁵ while the other students read along to themselves, thinking about the following questions as they do. Notice the only question that could be interpreted negatively below and ask if there are any parts that are unclear, which is a polite way of getting at errors and clarity. It is important, whatever format for group discussion you choose, to be sure that you don't set the students up for embarrassment. But we have found that the list below has resulted in lots of good discussions and few hurt feelings (we hope!).

Reader's Guide

- What's the main idea? Does the author stay on topic?
- Are the ideas sufficiently developed? Are enough examples given and are they clear?
- Are the ideas well-organized? Are they presented in an orderly fashion?
- Are the specifics discussed relevant to the topic?
- What parts of the essay do you not find clear? Why?
- What did you like most about the essay?

The teacher can of course devise and use any type of handout that she feels will help students, such as the TOEFL Writing Test scoring guide and analytic grid presented earlier.

⁵ Walter J. Ong in his famous book *Orality and Literacy* says that "in all the wonderful worlds that writing opens, the spoken word still resides and lives. Written texts all have to be related somehow, directly or indirectly, to the world of sound, the natural habitat of language, to yield their meanings. 'Reading' a text means converting it to sound, aloud or in the imagination, syllable-by-syllable in slow reading or sketchily in the rapid reading common to high-technology cultures." Having students read their essays in groups helps them to make great strides toward incorporating the essential orality of all writing into their work. For example, if the students are in groups of 4 or 5 people, which seems to be optimal in terms of working together, each person can provide a copy for the other students in the group and then read the essay herself aloud. Having the student read aloud in class is generally not considered a good idea since it opens up so many opportunities for embarrassment on the part of the reader. However, in small groups like this, particularly if the students have worked together and have formed trust in one another, it has been our experience that students enjoy this process tremendously.

In terms of grammar learning, we have found an excellent exercise that helps students to make sure that each others' essays are anchored in well-crafted sentences. It is common understanding that the subject/verb relationship in English represents the basic bone structure of the idea that the sentence contains, and grammatically speaking, everything in the sentence will in some way relate to or modify either the subject or verb. This is arguably the most important lesson that a beginning writing student can learn. As long as this relationship approximates the meaning that the author intended, the basic message of the sentence will be conveyed, and as a result, judgments concerning the flow of ideas can be made as well. An effective way of helping students to acquire an understanding of this is by having students in groups underline the subjects (and verbs) in each sentence and discuss their opinions with the others. This is not only a fun exercise but it represents excellent training in recognizing the main ideas in a sentence and how they might relate to following sentences.

We discussed in section five the idea that it is the "string of topics" that holds a paragraph together, assists the reader in connecting ideas, and helps create an overall sense of coherence for the paragraph and essay. Students can get practice in doing this in groups with their own drafts, discussing for example, the differences between grammatical subjects and topic strings and making suggestions for greater coherence of the writing. This kind of reading (for topic strings and proper relationship between subjects and verbs) can be done at virtually

any stage of the writing process. We have found that judgments of this kind are less ambiguous and therefore easier to make than making decisions about the correctness of the usage of a particular preposition, for example, knowledge that usually can only come after years of experience with the language. This is not the only use of group work, however.

It is also possible to extend the idea of group to include the entire class. In this case, the instructor will distribute one of the student's essays to the class and then read it herself.⁶ From this "platform," the teacher can approach the essay from any angle she chooses, discussing at once how the author was able to create a string of topics, for example, that held the essay together and the struggles that she underwent during the drafting process. The instructor can speak with authority about the work that the author put into her essay since by this stage she will have made several readings of the essay in conferences with the student. When we do such readings in our classes, we usually choose an essay in which the student has written about something particularly interesting or controversial. In this way, the essay is not looked at as a linguistic artifact but as a document that conveys the ideas of a living, thoughtful person to other living, thoughtful people, thereby reinforcing the concept of writing as communication. For example, a student recently wrote an essay in which she presented the idea that employers in her country are reluctant today to hire women because they are afraid that they will have to lose them for a long period of time to

⁶ It is of course possible for the author to read the essay, but it has been our experience that the instructor loses too much "control" in doing so and since the student is invariably focused too much on pronunciation while reading to the class, the meaning and authenticity, paradoxically perhaps, of the text suffer.

pregnancy. This of course led to a lively class discussion, providing them with essential “comprehensible input,” to use Krashen’s term.⁷

The instructor reading one of the student’s essay aloud to class like this also carries the extremely positive result of dramatizing and clarifying the ideas by giving them the stress that a native reader would employ. The advantages of reading aloud in class are too numerous for the scope of this article. Suffice it to say, however, that students get too little opportunity to hear texts read “naturally,” in the way in which a native would approach it. The clear reading of any text depends to a great extent upon the stress that is given to the ideas in it and the subordination of one idea to another on the sentence level; and an incorrect reading can result from not being aware of this stress. When an instructor reads an essay in this way in class, she has already spent a great deal of time with the student in conferences for just that purpose: helping her student to achieve readability. And when the essay is finally read to and discussed with the class, it gives the author a pride of ownership that would be perhaps more difficult to achieve were she to read the essay herself since her focus would likely be occupied with pronunciation issues rather than with meaning.

Conclusion

One of the underlying themes of this article is the idea that performance is basically a cognitive activity, as stated at the outset. Our attitude toward something predicts how we will approach it and deal with it. For example, in teaching writing, it is important for the teacher and the student to have a realistic view of the writing process *as a thinking process*. This idea is tremendously important for the teacher of EFL or ESL writing because it will help her shift the students’ focus from language concerns to the creation of meaning and the coherent presentation of ideas. As we saw earlier, one way to achieve this is by helping the student to make a distinction between rhetorical and sentence levels, looking at the shaping of ideas before their final clarification for the reader; another way is to help the student feel comfortable in employing the creative self before the editorial self, and then to learn to shift back and forth between the two when the need arises in her search for what to say and the best way in which to say it. The individual nature of the writing process almost dictates that there not be a single best way to teach writing. Nevertheless, there are certain concepts of writing that are more productive than others. It is hoped that the lessons in this article will help the reader clarify her *own* attitude toward the teaching of writing.

⁷ According to Krashen in The Natural Approach, we learn a new language through the process of understanding what we are reading and listening to. In this sense, the EFL/ESL class is the best place to begin to learn a foreign or second language since it gives the instructor the opportunity to control her messages so that they will be comprehended by the students. Krashen points out that the outside world does not provide this opportunity and can be very unforgiving to the language learner.

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