

# ESL Writing and The Principle of Nonjudgmental Awareness: Rationale and Implementation

*A process-oriented nonjudgmental instructional approach can help ESL students become better writers.*

by Loretta Frances Kasper

Recent statistics show that ESL students enrolled in community colleges are steadily increasing. In fact, Crandall reports that ESL is the fastest growing area of study in community colleges in the United States. In community colleges within the City University of New York system (CUNY), dubbed by Crandall, a “microcosm of the United States as a whole,” (4) 25% of entering students now need instruction in English as a Second Language (Nunez-Wormack). By 2000, estimates are that more than 50% of full-time first-year students in the CUNY system will be ESL students (Professional Staff Congress). College ESL students must demonstrate writing proficiency for full entry into the mainstream curriculum. However, developing this proficiency presents an especially difficult problem for such students.

Studies of both basic and ESL writers have shown that instructor feedback plays a significant role in students’ progress as writers (Bass; Zak) and that the priorities of the instructor become the priorities of the student. Therefore, when responding to ESL students’ writing, instructors must be aware of the priorities they communicate to their students and should provide evaluative feedback that decreases writing anxiety as it increases writing satisfaction. I have found that implementing

Gallwey’s principle of nonjudgmental awareness with a process approach that emphasizes fluency and clarity of expression and de-emphasizes correctness has improved the performance of intermediate-level (TOFEL score of approximately 350) ESL students.

## **The Principle of Nonjudgmental Awareness**

The principle of nonjudgmental awareness was first advanced by W. Timothy Gallwey in his book, *The Inner Game of Tennis*. Gallwey believes that learning proceeds most effectively and effortlessly when the learners allow themselves to move naturally through the learning process, aware of relevant aspects of performance without making excessive critical judgments about that performance.

Although initially advanced as a means of learning a physical skill such as tennis, the principle of nonjudgmental awareness has been applied to learning skills in academic domains. For example, Ploger and Carlock successfully used this principle to teach students to construct computer programs designed to represent ideas from biology. They found that implementation of the principle of nonjudgmental awareness made it easier for students to learn how to write programs that were both

meaningful and accurate, and then, to revise those programs to explain the problem-solving strategy step-by-step. Ploger and Carlock believe that the nonjudgmental instructional technique lessened the anxiety students felt about the task of writing a computer program and ultimately enabled these students to gain a deeper overall understanding of the principles of biology.

Task anxiety and insufficient understanding of the writing process also plague and inhibit the writing performance of ESL students. For this reason, I decided to adopt a nonjudgmental instructional approach in an attempt to lessen my intermediate-level ESL students' writing anxiety and to improve their writing performance. As I use the term, "non-judgmental instructional approach" refers to an approach to writing instruction that is process- rather than product-oriented, is student-centered, and one in which the chief goal of instruction is to help students attain fluency and clarity of expression. I do not explicitly teach grammar in the ESL writing class; rather, students acquire and improve their use of the grammatical structures they need to express ideas most effectively through a series of progressive attempts to refine and clarify those ideas. Thus, mechanical accuracy is not the means to achieving fluency and clarity of expression; rather, mechanical accuracy is the result of having worked to express ideas most fluently and clearly.

To evaluate the effectiveness of this approach, I conducted an informal three-semester study. My students come from a number of diverse linguistic, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds, including Russian, Hispanic, Haitian, and Asian. Over a period of three semesters, I gradually adopted a less error- and more expression-oriented response approach in which I moved from correcting virtually all stu-

dent errors to simply identifying those errors and requiring that the students themselves correct them. The results of my informal analyses indicated that over the course of the three semesters a progressively greater percentage (61%, 82%, 89%) of the students passed the final writing examination. This writing final required students to plan, write, and revise a persuasive essay on their choice of three assigned topics based on the work done during the semester and was cross-graded by two other ESL instructors in the department.

### **Rationale for the Nonjudgmental Approach**

Although basic writing instructors may find nonjudgmental response not a radical departure from traditional pedagogy, the approach to teaching writing in many ESL programs is quite different from that in most basic writing programs. Basic writing programs generally apply a process approach to writing, emphasizing the development of ideas and gradually placing greater responsibility on the students as they go through the writing process. In this approach, writing becomes a process of discovery in which "ideas are generated and not just transcribed" (Susser 35).

In contrast, many ESL programs still maintain a product approach to writing in which grammar is explicitly taught and in which the final product becomes more important than the process by which it was created. In product-driven ESL writing programs, instructors continually provide students with accurate models of language, the assumption being that, with more grammar and more correction, students will be able to produce fluent and clear compositions.

One of the rationales offered for product-driven ESL writing programs is that

ESL students are required to pass college assessment examinations that often judge writing on the basis of grammatical accuracy. In one study, Sweedler-Brown found that “sentence-level error was . . . the critical factor in pass/fail decisions in ESL essays” (12), and she concludes that “we may be doing our (ESL) students a disservice if we are not willing to become language teachers as well as writing teachers” (15). The problem with this approach is that too often the priority becomes teaching students sufficient language rules so they can write accurately enough to pass an examination, rather than helping them develop their potential to discover and express their ideas.

Furthermore, a study conducted by MacGowan-Gilhooly demonstrated that when the ESL writing course focused on producing grammatical correctness for the purpose of preparing students to pass a college writing assessment test, they did not progress as well, and some actually regressed from former performance levels. Of course, this regression may have been the result of students’ attempts to produce more sophisticated linguistic structures; however, MacGowan-Gilhooly attributes it to the pressure produced by writing for evaluation where that evaluation depends upon correctness of language rather than upon quality of content. Like MacGowan-Gilhooly, Bass has also found that, in general, students’ progress is often inhibited when they anticipate that their writing will be evaluated for its correctness.

### **Implementing the Principle of Nonjudgmental Awareness**

On the very first day of classes, I describe the nonjudgmental instructional approach to my ESL student writers. I explain that I want them to focus on

expressing ideas in their essays, and we discuss the purpose of writing as the communication of those ideas to another person. I tell students not to worry about correctness in their initial drafts, to allow their ideas to flow freely onto the paper. I explain that they will receive both instructor and peer feedback on each essay. I then announce that when I respond to their essays, I will not be correcting errors in grammar. Instead, I will point out where the errors are, but that they will be responsible for correcting those errors. I tell them that if they have any problems, they should discuss those problems with me, and we will solve them together.

Some students do express anxiety when they first hear about this approach; however, after only a few assignments, they discover that as they work through several drafts of each essay, increasing the fluency and clarity of each subsequent draft, they gradually become aware of the mechanical errors and rhetorical features which obscure meaning in their writing. With their continued practice, my support, and the suggestions of their peer partners, the students learn how to reduce their errors. Successfully assuming this responsibility not only gives ESL students the confidence they need to continue to improve their writing skills, but also helps them to view good writing as clear communication rather than merely as accurate grammar.

Because priorities communicated through instructor feedback have such a great impact on the progress of student writers, it is important to adopt response styles that will be most facilitative to this progress and which will lessen students’ anxiety and increase their confidence. We can help students gain confidence in their writing abilities by asking them to gradually assume more responsibility for their growth as writers, while at the same time

providing them with the instructional support they need to achieve their writing goals. Implementing a nonjudgmental approach in an ESL writing class does just that by creating a climate in which students are acknowledged for their successes and, at the same time, are taught specific strategies for dealing with their deficiencies in writing. Moreover, a nonjudgmental instructional approach asks students to assume a more active role in their own learning as they critique both their own and their classmates work. Feedback from both the instructor and their peers encourages students to express ideas more clearly and more fluently. As Connors and Lunsford's research demonstrates, the more student writers focus on clarifying meaning, the fewer the number of errors they make.

### **Nonjudgmental Techniques**

The pedagogical techniques used in a nonjudgmental writing class are, for the most part, student—rather than instructor—centered. Students assume greater responsibility for their progress and learn instructional techniques to help them assume this responsibility. Below I describe some of the nonjudgmental techniques that I have found effective. These techniques include providing instructor feedback via task-oriented questions, guiding students in providing peer evaluation, teaching students to vocalize thoughts when they have trouble writing, and obtaining student feedback through writing evaluation questionnaires and writing autobiographies.

#### **Providing Instructor Feedback Via Task-Oriented Questions**

While error correction is instructor-centered, task-oriented questions are student-

centered. Task-oriented questions direct students' attention to ways they may improve the content and the clarity of their ideas. Task-oriented questions may request more information, reflect on students' thoughts, and/or share experiences similar to those expressed by the student (Beaven). These are some of the task-oriented questions I have used: "Could you be more specific, provide more details, about this point?" "Could you open up the essay with a more general statement?" "How does this example relate to the main point of your essay?" These task-oriented questions have helped ESL students improve and expand the content of their essays and increase the clarity of their ideas.

#### **Using Peer Evaluation**

According to Stanley, "peer evaluation can provide student writers with a wide range of benefits, including reduced writing anxiety, increased sense of audience, and increased fluency" (217). Moreover, Stanley asserts that peer evaluation "facilitates the transition from what Flower and Hayes term 'writer-based prose' to 'reader-based prose'" (218). In the process of critiquing their classmates' writings, students take the stance of the reader; they learn what works and what does not work and develop an increased awareness of the elements of fluent and clear writing. However, Stanley has found that for peer evaluation to be effective, students need to be coached "to be specific in their responses, . . . to point to problematic portions of text, to alert writers to lapses in coherence, to offer specific advice for solving these problems, and to collaborate with the writer on more suitable phrases" (226-7).

Following Stanley's recommendations, I offered ESL students such coaching.

Then I divided the class into several groups of two or three students each, with the only restriction that, whenever possible, students within the same group not speak the same native language because they might tend to use (and so not recognize) the same inaccurate English language structures which would obscure the clarity of their writing. I then asked the students to exchange and read the drafts of the others in their group and to fill out a peer evaluation questionnaire for each paper they read. This peer evaluation questionnaire asked the students to evaluate how clearly ideas were expressed as they answered the following eight questions: (1) What was the topic of the essay? (2) What was the writer's opinion about this topic? (3) Where in the essay was this opinion stated? (4) What did you like best about this essay? (5) List any places where you did not understand the writer's meaning. He/she will need to clarify these things in the next draft. (6) What would you like to know more about when the writer revises this essay? (7) Reread the first paragraph of the essay. Do you think this is a good beginning? Does it make you feel like reading on? Explain; and (8) How could the writer improve this paper when he/she revises it? Make only one suggestion.

Some researchers have reported that ESL students are often recalcitrant when asked to evaluate the writing of their peers (Nelson and Murphy); however, I found that, after some initial hesitation, students enjoyed the peer evaluation process and said that it was very helpful. This activity made writing "a task of communicating" (Stanley 217), and in their interactions with peers, students developed increased confidence and were more willing to take risks in their writing. In addition, these partnerships helped to promote interpersonal relationships among students lead-

ing them to an increased understanding and tolerance of cultural differences.

### Teaching Students to Vocalize Thoughts

Another effective nonjudgmental technique is teaching students to vocalize thoughts to help them get past writing blocks. Students can do this alone or within the context of their peer evaluation group. Peter Elbow has pointed out the value of vocalizing thoughts: "If you are stuck writing . . . , there is nothing better than finding one person, or more, to talk to. . . . I write a paper; it's not very good; I discuss it with someone: after fifteen minutes of back-and-forth I say something in response to a question . . . of his and he says, 'But why didn't you say that? That's good. That's clear'" (49).

When my ESL students are doing in-class writing or interacting in their peer evaluation groups, I circulate around the room to check work or offer assistance. If I notice an inaccuracy or a confusion in writing, I ask the student, "What did you want to say here?" I then suggest that the student write down what he or she has just told me. I also tell students that if they get stuck in the writing process, they should think of how they would express the idea if they were speaking to someone. More often than not, my intermediate level ESL students, even those with somewhat limited fluency in the spoken language, are able to tell me or their writing partners in relatively correct English what they wanted to say. On those occasions when students are not able to vocalize their ideas completely, they usually can communicate enough of the idea so that either I or their peer partners can provide assistance. Thus, asking students to vocalize thoughts can help them to improve both written and spoken English.

If we can get students to think of how they would communicate their ideas orally and then transfer that oral communication to the written form, we may be able to demystify the writing process and help students to improve their writing. I have found that when ESL students vocalize their thoughts when writing, the result is a decrease in the number of structural and grammatical errors and an increase in the clarity of expression.

### Student Feedback: Writing Evaluation Questionnaires

This questionnaire, designed to elucidate the kinds of teacher responses that students perceived as helpful, asked them to identify the specific instructor feedback techniques they found most useful when revising their writing. A majority of the students found instructor feedback in the form of task-oriented questions useful in revision, stating that these questions directed attention to exactly what needed to be improved in the essay. Some of the other responses indicated that feedback on how to organize the essay and on how to write a good introduction and conclusion was helpful. Many of the students also said that although at first they were uncomfortable about correcting their own grammatical errors, as the semester went on, they were able to find and correct many of their errors. This discovery went a long way toward helping students become better writers. As many of them indicated in their feedback questionnaires, being able to find and correct their own errors gave them confidence in their ability to write English.

### Student Feedback: Writing Autobiographies

The writing autobiography was the last essay students wrote before taking their

writing final. The writing autobiography question sheet was adapted from one used by Sandman and Weiser (19) and asked students to describe positive and negative experiences in writing English and their strengths and weaknesses as writers. In addition to the three questions suggested by Sandman and Weiser, I also asked students the following question, “What have you learned this semester about your ability as a writer? How, specifically, do *you* think your writing has improved? What areas of your writing do you think still need work?” This writing autobiography had several objectives—to elucidate students’ attitudes toward writing, to help them monitor their development as writers, and to assist them in developing sound criteria for assessing their writing performance. Moreover, by increasing students’ awareness of their own writing experiences and knowledge, the writing autobiography encouraged them to think of themselves as writers.

Their responses to the writing autobiography activity indicated that students had developed a clearer understanding of their personal involvement in the writing task. The students all said that writing was a positive experience when they were writing about something that they enjoyed because then they were able to express their ideas on a subject of interest. They each noted that a negative experience was when they had to write an essay for the writing assessment test upon entrance to the college. Many of them said that they lost confidence and felt unable to write because of the pressure. They knew that they had to write correctly to pass the test and that the result of the test would determine which courses they would be required or allowed to take in college. As a result, some said that the pressure of the test “had made their minds go blank.” These responses support the claims of

both MacGowan-Gilhooly and Bass that writing for evaluation can inhibit students' progress.

Their responses to the writing autobiographies indicated that when these ESL students focused on expressing their ideas, they found writing to be a positive experience. In contrast, when students focused on producing correct language, they concentrated on their perceived weaknesses, their ideas were stifled, and writing became a negative experience.

After being exposed to the nonjudgmental approach, when asked to describe their strengths and weaknesses, students generally focused on their strengths. A common response was, "I have good ideas, and it's interesting to tell other people about those ideas." Furthermore, few of these students cited grammar as a weakness; in fact, their responses illustrated that they had come to view mistakes as a means to improving writing. Rather than weaknesses in grammar, their responses now focused on weaknesses in conveying meaning, such as difficulty organizing their thoughts or writing an effective introduction or conclusion.

For a nonjudgmental approach to enhance writing proficiency, it must result in students' experiencing increased confidence and decreased anxiety when writing English. The students' feedback on the question of what they had learned that semester about their ability as writers demonstrated that the nonjudgmental approach had achieved this goal. One response predominated in each of the essays; the students had learned that they were able to communicate their ideas in written English. They expressed an increased confidence in their ability to write, so that they were more willing to take risks in their writing. Moreover, they had

learned that if they made mistakes, they were not only able to find and correct those mistakes, but they were able to learn from them.

Here are some students responses: "I learned I could make my writing better if I tried areas that I still need work in"; "I saw that after every writing task, I could express my ideas better and fully"; "I learned how to check my work by myself. I was really surprised when I saw that I could find a lot of mistakes without any help"; "I realized that I can break down a subject in my own words without much difficulty"; "I learned that I have the ability to write more than I used to"; and "I got more confidence in my writing. It is my firm belief that in the future I will know how to write English better if I practice it every day."

The focus on fluency and clarity of expression in the nonjudgmental, process-oriented approach also helped ESL students to learn the value of revision. I encouraged students to refine ideas, not just to correct language in their revisions, and many commented that writing an essay several times had taught them how to clarify meaning by adding new information and by rearranging sections of the essay.

In his research on second language writing, Krashen (19) has found that developmental writers usually do not understand that revision can help them generate new ideas. In fact, they usually think that their first draft contains all their ideas, and they believe that revising an essay simply means making the first draft neater by correcting language errors. In the process of revision for clarity of expression, my students discovered not only that they could write English, but also that writing itself became easier and more satisfying with each subsequent revision.

## Conclusion and Implications for Instruction

Bernard Susser has noted the concern of some ESL researchers that process-based approaches emphasize fluency at the expense of accuracy. However, my experience indicates that a process-based, nonjudgmental instructional approach can help intermediate-level ESL students improve both the fluency and the accuracy with which they express their ideas in written English. Like the students in Sweedler-Brown's study, my students had to improve grammatical accuracy to pass the writing final. Nevertheless, in contrast to Sweedler-Brown's contention that we should become "language teachers as well as writing teachers" (15), I found that the number of students who passed the final rose as I provided less grammatical feedback. In fact, the students made the greatest progress in expressing themselves fluently, clearly, and correctly when they themselves assumed the most responsibility for their own learning.

As my ESL students shifted their focus from correctness of form to fluency and clarity of expression, they discovered that they had something to say and that they were able to say it fluently, clearly, and, for the most part, correctly. Writing became a more positive experience as they gained confidence in their ability to express themselves in written English. The

students became aware of their strengths and weaknesses as writers, and when given the time and the opportunity to develop their strengths, they were able to minimize their weaknesses.

Most importantly, they got their priorities straight as they came to realize that the primary goal of writing is the communication of ideas and that through the process of writing we discover and refine those ideas. They also learned that in the process of clarifying ideas, they could minimize language errors. As a result, they became less intimidated by their mistakes.

For years, basic writing programs have focused on refining writing skills through a step-by-step process in which the writer is encouraged to develop and expand upon ideas, and is ultimately responsible for his or her own progress. It is time for ESL writing programs to follow suit. If the goal of ESL composition instruction is to help students become proficient writers of English, it must provide a learning environment which both allows students to gain confidence in their ability as writers and transfers the ultimate responsibility for their development as writers from teachers to students. Implementing the principle of nonjudgmental awareness in the ESL writing class achieves this goal by making communicative competence, rather than grammatical accuracy, the primary focus of instruction.

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