

*This article describes the benefits of adopting a nonjudgemental response approach in the ESA writing class*

## **Responding to ESL Student Writing: The Value of a Nonjudgemental Approach**

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Recent statistics show that the number of ESL students enrolled in community colleges is steadily increasing. In fact, according to data reported by the City University of New York (CUNY), 25 percent of students now entering the community colleges within the CUNY system are ESL students (Nunez-Wormack, 1993). By the year 2000, it is estimated that more than 50 percent of full-time freshman within the CUNY system will be ESL students (Professional Staff Congress, 1994). For most of these students, full entry into the mainstream curriculum is contingent upon demonstrating proficiency in basic skills such as writing.

Developing proficiency in writing presents an especially difficult problem for ESL students, many of whom believe that they cannot write English. This "I can't write English syndrome" (Thomas, 1993) leads to anxiety and thus inhibits progress in achieving writing proficiency. Kaplan Bass (1993) suggests that it is not the task of writing per se that leads to anxiety in basic or developmental writing students, but rather the anticipation of the evaluation of that writing by the teacher or others.

### **Writing Evaluation and Writing Anxiety**

Many ESL students recall past difficulties with writing for evaluation, and their perceptions of themselves as writers have been shaped by their writing experiences in school. They often continue to have difficulty writing because they have been conditioned to expect failure. These students also tend to evaluate themselves as they write, a habit that compounds the anxiety and inhibits the generation of ideas.

When instructors evaluate their writing, ESL students may see this evaluation as a confirmation of their self-judgment of deficiency in L2. Students, already conditioned to the idea that there is something wrong with their English, come to believe that writing is designed to magnify and

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expose this deficiency. As a result, they refuse to take risks in writing (Shattghnessy, 1988).

### **Decreasing ESL Students' Writing Anxiety**

Because so many students come to class with high levels of anxiety resulting from the preconceived notion that they are weak writers, ESL writing teachers must be actively concerned with decreasing student anxiety if they wish to enhance writing

correctly that thought is conveyed. As a result, students become so preoccupied with correctness of form that they are unable to derive satisfaction from the writing process, and their progress as writers is severely inhibited (PerI, 1988).

Following this line of reasoning, MacGowan-Gilhooly (1991) recommends adopting a "Fluency First" approach to teaching ESL writing. This approach redirects the ESL student's attention toward fluent and clear expression of ideas, and away from perfectly correct language and form. Only after students have learned to express themselves fluent and clearly in writing, do they proceed to correcting errors in language and form. MacGowan4;ilhooly reports success using this approach, as her ESL students benefitted from improved writing and increased pass rates.

We believed that our community college ESL students harbored anxieties and negative attitudes toward their own writing. To confirm our intuitions, at the beginning of the semester, we had our intermediate and advanced level ESL students compose writing autobiographies. The writing autobiographies, based on a model described by Sandman and Weiser (1993), asked students to describe a positive and a negative experience writing English and to evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses as writers of English.

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### Pre-Course Writing Autobiographies

As we had suspected, in their responses to these pre-course writing auto-biographies, our community college ESL students, at both the intermediate and the advanced levels, expressed similar anxious behaviors, preoccupation with error, and negative attitudes toward their own writing abilities. The following examples are representative of the student feedback we obtained through the pre-course writing autobiographies.

Several intermediate level students voiced frustration caused by negative instructor evaluation of their writing. One student explained, "I was very frustrated when I took four hours writing, but I got back a red paper. I think I have good ideas, but I can't express them well." Another said, "I can't explain myself clearly. I have more weaknesses than strengths. I get frustrated when I know what I want to say, but the reader doesn't understand me." A third commented, "I felt very frustrated when my teacher didn't accept my composition because I made too many mistakes."

Advanced-level students expressed similar negative attitudes as they described their anxieties in a variety of writing situations. One student wrote of her experiences in class and drew an interesting analogy, "when I have to write an essay in English during class, it is the most difficult time for me. I feel that my mind is totally blank, and my fingers tremble when I write each word. For me to write English was like to force a fish to walk on the sand." Another vividly described his feelings after being fired from his job because of poor writing skills, "In fact I was so depressed when I was dismissed from my job because of my inexperience writing English. During the test, the writing skill was so difficult that they let me take off my shirt because I was sweating all over my body."

Both intermediate and advanced students recounted the anxiety and frustration caused by a preoccupation with correctness. The following responses clearly express how detrimental this preoccupation can be to writing progress: "I think I have a lot of mistakes in grammar. I have a lot of things in my head, but it is difficult for me to explain all my ideas. I have a big problem with spelling also. I will never be a good writer, no matter how hard I try;" "when I begin to write something, [am nervous. I don't even know why. Sometimes I think I will never write correctly;" and finally, "Seeing a lot of errors on my paper killed me and embarrassed me a lot"

In their responses to the precourse writing autobiographies, our students had communicated the belief that their fear of writing was inhibiting their progress, and we agreed that this anxiety was a major obstacle to them in their attempts to improve the quality of their writing. We needed to develop an instructional approach that would decrease our students' anxieties about writing and at the same time help them to become more proficient writers of English.

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their confidence. Mary Beaven (1977) has found that instructor feedback that requests more information, reflects on students' thoughts, and shares experiences similar to those expressed by the student both encourages the writer to take risks and establishes a climate of trust.

Beaven's (1977) findings suggest that it is the style or structure of instructor feedback that determines a successful result for students. We agreed that comments that encouraged ESL students to take control over their composing would promote both improved writing and increased confidence in their ability to write English. We therefore responded to students' writing not by correcting errors, but by asking task oriented questions and/or by making task oriented comments of the type recommended by Beaven.

We asked such questions as: 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? We made comments, such as: You need to go deeper to analyze your feelings; could you describe one special occasion that illustrates the meaning or the importance of your relationship? You have stated an opinion; you now need to give at least one reason for your opinion and then discuss it. This is interesting! In your conclusion you mentioned the difficulties of adjusting to life in the United States; could you discuss these difficulties a bit more?

These task-oriented questions were designed to focus students' attention on improving and expanding the content of their essays and on increasing the clarity of their ideas. They were also aimed at encouraging students to take a more active role in learning how to write. We wanted our students to assume greater responsibility for developing and refining their essays, and we believed that they could handle this responsibility. We felt that by experiencing small successes in the process of revising each individual essay, they would gradually become more confident, as well as more proficient, writers.

During the semester, students at both the intermediate and the advanced levels wrote multiple drafts of each essay. Some essays were written in class; some were written at home. Students were required to produce

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two or three revisions of each essay, in each focusing on clarifying ideas or on providing more information where necessary.

As students strove for greater clarity of expression, we also encouraged their' to work on expressing ideas as correctly as possible. We alerted students to minor errors (i.e., those that did not obscure meaning; for example, tense, spelling, or word form) by circling those errors. We both circled and used editorial symbols to identify more serious errors (i.e., those that obscured meaning; for example, word order errors). We provided further grammatical assistance only when students requested it, and only after students had made several attempts to clarify and correct their own writing.

We found that, particularly for students at the intermediate level, requests for assistance were more numerous at the beginning of the semester. However, these requests diminished in number as, with each succeeding assignment, students took more responsibility for their own writing. They gradually gained confidence in their ability both to express themselves more effectively and to check their own work; and in fact, grammatical accuracy improved at both levels. By the end of the semester, requests for grammatical assistance were rare, even for intermediate level students, and had been replaced by inquiries about the effectiveness of an introduction or conclusion or about whether enough information had been provided to make the desired point.

## **Assessing Our Results: Post-Course Writing Autobiographies**

To assess whether our nonjudgmental response approach had been successful in decreasing anxiety and in fostering more positive attitudes toward writing, we asked students to compose post-course writing autobiographies. Like the pre-course autobiography, the post-course "writing autobiography asked students to describe a positive and a negative experience when writing English and to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses as writers. In addition, the post-course autobiography asked students to respond to the following questions: What have you [earned 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

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the value of revising an essay several times. They said that revising the essay helped to clarify their ideas and to make the ideas better.

The responses of both intermediate and advanced level students revealed increased confidence in their writing. Intermediate students offered the following thought: "I have good ideas, and it's interesting to tell other people about those ideas; "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;" 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." Advanced students' responses were similarly encouraging: "I think I have learned many things this semester. However, the one that impresses me the most is that I have started to have more self-confidence about writing;" and "This semester I have learned a lot about my ability in English because I didn't know that I had the capacity to write an essay of seven pages. Although I did them with some mistakes, I had the boldness to do them."

Finally, two advanced-level students provided especially eloquent arguments for the success of our non-judgmental response approach. The first student wrote, "The most helpful for me is when the teacher doesn't force me to change or add some ideas. I need to understand that it can help my essay to be more interesting. The teacher has to feel how he/she can help the students, but he should never push or force them. Also, the teacher must believe in us. If the teacher believes in the students, the students believe in the teacher." Finally, the second student summed up as follows:

"In conclusion I want to say that at the beginning of this semester I didn't want to write at all. But my teacher gave me some kind of power, and now it seems very pleasant for me to write something.

The student feedback provided by the post-course writing autobiographies supports the efficacy of a nonjudgmental approach for students at both the intermediate and the advanced levels. Our ESL students developed increased confidence in their ability as writers and a more positive attitude toward the task of writing itself as they learned that refining ideas is more important than correcting language if one is to progress as a writer.

Moreover, for us as instructors, when we focused attention away from correcting our students' errors, we became more fully able to appreciate and enjoy what these students had to say in their essays. The writing class thereby became a more pleasant experience not only for our students, but for us as well,

### **Final Writing Assessment**

When we adopted a non-judgmental response approach, both intermediate and advanced level students enjoyed the additional benefit of increased pass rates on final writing assessments. The intermediate level writing assessment required students to choose one of several topics provided by the instructor. These writing prompts were based on work covered during the

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semester. Students planned, wrote, and revised their essays in class. The advanced-level writing assessment required students to compile a portfolio consisting of one essay written in class and two essays written at home. Students were required to submit three revised drafts of each of the two at-home essays. Both the intermediate and the advanced-level writing assessments were cross-graded by another instructor teaching the course. At both levels, students received either P(ass) or R(epeat) on their writing assessments. Students who received R were required to repeat the course.

Although previously student pass rates had been very disappointing, after the adoption of a nonjudgmental approach, the writing exam pass rate increased for students at both levels. For intermediate level students, the pass rate rose from 71 percent to 89 percent. For advanced level students, the pass rate rose from 60 percent to 72 percent.

If we hope to decrease students' writing anxiety, thereby giving them the power to develop their writing proficiency. We must provide a learning environment that transfers the ultimate responsibility for their development as writers from us to them. By assuming this responsibility, students develop increased confidence in their ability to write, as they learn that they have something to say and that their ideas have value.

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