

Evaluating Second-Language Essays in Regular Composition Classes: Toward a Pluralistic U.S. Rhetoric

ROBERT E. LAND JR. AND
CATHERINE WHITLEY

How we go about empowering English as a second language (ESL) students when they enter regular college composition classes in the United States is determined by our response to two questions: What do we wish them to be empowered to do, and for whom are they being empowered? Our first response to these questions (a traditional, nominal one) is that we wish ESL students to acquire enough facility with standard written English (SWE) to succeed in school and in the workplace for their own benefit and, second, especially in the case of the large numbers of ESL students who are immigrants to this country, for the benefit of our society. To achieve these goals, we need to emphasize grammatical and syntactic correctness and, certainly at the college level where students are called upon to use written communication in a variety of disciplines and for a variety of purposes, we need to emphasize the larger rhetorical conventions of academic writing. Although, as Raines (1986) notes, we have problems of implementation even in separate ESL classes, we have at hand the means of establishing programs to meet these goals.

Our nominal goal of helping students avoid linguistic disenfranchisement seems, at first glance, both pragmatic and responsible. However, the prevalent methods of evaluating writing—especially in classes where ESL students compete directly with native speakers (NSs) and where instructors have little or no training in teaching second language (L2) learners—suggest that we don't wish ESL students to attain only a "facility" with written English; instead, we expect them to become entirely fluent in English, a goal different in nature and implication from our purported one. The discrepancy between our purported and apparent goals for instructing ESL students emerges in our standards of evaluation as a hidden agenda—that is, an agenda that is rarely made known to the students whose writing is being evaluated and one that is seldom clear to the evaluator (see Sommers, 1982; Zamel, 1985). Thus, even when an ESL writer produces an error-free composition in

English, a hidden agenda leads the evaluator to find fault with other formal features. Our research (Land and Whitley, 1986) suggests that the text features influencing English NS readers most negatively are the ESL students' patterns of organization, patterns established in what Purves (1986) calls "rhetorical communities" where ESL students learned their native language. At present, our understanding of the cultural determination of rhetorical patterns is limited, although investigations like those by Purves (1986), Hinds (1983), and Kaplan (1983) are extending these limits. We probably know too little about the mechanisms of our own preferred rhetorical patterns, let alone about those that ESL students bring with them, to establish programs aimed at reifying "ours" by isolating and eliminating "theirs" from their written English. But even if such knowledge were available, our efforts at making ESL students entirely fluent would almost certainly fail.

To be truly "fluent," our ESL students would have to be able to produce essays in English that were not only grammatically and syntactically, but also rhetorically indistinguishable from those written by their NS peers. But, as Haugen (1986) points out, even writers who are isolated for years from their first language (L1) culture produce texts in their L2 which carry noticeable L1 features; and most of our ESL students maintain strong associations with members of their L1 rhetorical communities. The distinct world views of these communities influence members' thoughts, actions, and, consequently, their patterns of communication for many generations (see, e.g., Giordano, 1976; Havighurst, 1978; McGoldrick, 1982). "English only" movements and literacy crises notwithstanding, we can neither legislate nor educate away culturally determined rhetorical differences in writing.

To enable ESL students to write English with "facility," we should, of course, pay special attention to teaching the linguistic conventions of SWE. We may also be able to teach them how to use some of SWE's rhetorical conventions. But such instruction may not be an end in itself. In the United States, SWE rhetorical conventions generally emphasize strong sentence-to-sentence connections, resulting in "linear" prose (see Kaplan, 1966), and a deductive logical arrangement that satisfies what Lakoff and Johnson (1980) call our "objectivist myth." But there are many patterns of cohesion, other logics, other myths through which views of the world may be constructed (see Knoblauch and Brannon, 1984). In teaching SWE rhetorical conventions, we are teaching students to reproduce in a mechanical fashion our preferred vehicle of understanding.

As MacCannell and MacCannell (1982) note, "culture that reproduces itself as a series of endless mirrorings, yet adds nothing to either the original 'natural culture' or the original 'image' of it, is literally the death of culture" (p. 28). Elsewhere they stress that "the heart of cultural evolution . . . begins with a production and proceeds to a reproduction that is not a simple doubling but a reflection at a higher power" (p. 26). In this view, we are encouraging our ESL students to contribute to the death of our culture: Their textual productions are simply to mirror, in their use of our rhetorical tradition, an experience that might be entirely foreign to them. We are not asking ESL

From *Richness in Writing: Empowering ESL Students*. Ed. Donna M. Johnson and Duane H. Roen. New York: Longman, 1989. 284-93.

writers to add to our culture from their own storehouses of experience; the sense is that our culture has reached the end of its evolution: There's nothing more to add. Trying to teach ESL students to reproduce SWE rhetoric may be not only likely to fail, but even if it were to be successful, it would be a pyrrhic victory.

Thus, we must change the way we read, respond to, and evaluate ESL writers' work at all stages of its development. If we fail to do so, our composition courses will be as retributive as they are instructive. If we wish to admit rhetorical concerns openly to our system of evaluation (thus unmasking the hidden agenda), if we believe that concerns of "correctness," content, and rhetoric are inseparable, then we must learn to recognize, value, and foster the alternative rhetorics that the ESL student brings to our language. In this chapter, we argue for such an approach, one that will not only empower students to succeed in school and at work, but will also free them to incorporate their own forms of logic into their writing, to the potential benefit of our language and culture.

RHETORICAL DIFFERENCES

No one who has ever read through a stack of compositions written by native and nonnative speakers needs to consult research to confirm that there are differences. Differences in the number of surface errors made by ESL students are obvious to teachers and have been well documented by researchers (Ahrens, 1984; Fein, 1980; Kroll, 1983). But error is not the only difference between texts written by ESL students and their NS peers. Even with error removed from all essays, researchers (McGirt, 1984; Whitley, 1984) have found that NS readers give higher scores to papers of NSs than to those written by ESL students. Clearly, other important differences exist.

Most of the research designed to find these important differences has focused on patterns of organization. Some of this research, following the work of Halliday and Hasan (1976), has focused on contrasting cohesive ties and drawing conclusions about textual cohesion from analysis of the ties, or from global measures of cohesion, or both (Connor, 1984; Land & Whitley, 1986; Lindsay, 1984; Scarcella, 1984). Along with more general investigations of differences (Hinds, 1983; Kaplan, 1966; Purves, 1986), these studies taken as a whole demonstrate fairly clearly that ESL writers connect their ideas differently than do NS writers. They demonstrate as well that these differences in organization are, at least in part, the result of ESL students' membership in distinct rhetorical communities and not necessarily the result of inadequate mastery of U.S. English. Finally, they demonstrate that these organizational differences are partly responsible for ESL students' essays being judged by NS readers as inferior to native speakers' essays.

One of the questions we have asked in our research (Land & Whitley, 1986) is whether or not the L1 status of readers would affect their perceptions of batches of student essays sampled from freshman composition classes where about half the students were nonnative speakers of English. We found,

predictably, that U.S.-born NS readers rated the papers of ESL writers lower than the papers of NS students. But we also found that readers whose L1 was not English (our sample included native speakers of German, Spanish, and Japanese) rated essays from both ESL and NS students as being of about equal quality. Data from analytic rating scales revealed that the differences in perceptions of quality were probably the result of differences in perceptions of organization: The U.S.-born NS readers marked down ESL essays for what they perceived as problems of organization; readers whose L1 was not English did not mark down ESL texts for organization. In this respect our results mirror the language-specific research of Hinds (1983), who found that native English speaking readers rated the organization of English translations of Japanese newspaper articles lower than Japanese speaking readers rated the originals.

From our results we concluded that either our English NNS readers have lax standards and can't tell a poorly organized essay from a well organized one or they can accommodate to more kinds of rhetorical patterns than can NS readers. Because both groups of readers agreed on the ratings of NS essays, and because both groups were sampled from our pool of experienced teachers of freshman writing, we opted for the second conclusion. We believe that our bilingual and multilingual readers' experience with different kinds of texts used in different cultures allow them to adapt to and value writing that employs varying rhetorical organizations.

READERS READING

Any reader confronting any text faces it with a preconceived set of expectations; as Iser (1976/1978) and Carrell (1982) note, the reader comes to a text armed with the sum of previous reading experiences. The reader and the text interact in the process of reading. The wandering viewpoint is a means of describing the way in which the reader is present in the text. This presence is at a point where memory and expectation converge, and the resultant dialectic movement brings about a continual modification of memory and an increasing complexity of expectation. These processes depend on the reciprocal spotlighting of the perspectives, which provide interrelated backgrounds for one another. The interaction between these backgrounds provokes the reader into synthesizing activity (Iser, 1976/1978). The expectations of a teacher of writing in the United States would be based upon the grammatical, syntactic, and rhetorical conventions of SWE, expectations which the student essay should trigger and bring into play, thus beginning the dialectic movement. For instance, the presence of an identifiable, analytic thesis sentence signals a certain rhetorical pattern and allows the reader to begin building a set of expectations specific to that particular text. The reader remembers the thesis, moves on, and expects to find its promise fulfilled.

Because ESL readers seem to find organization in ESL texts—texts that NS readers judge to be poorly organized—perhaps they have a wider and more varied set of expectations when they come to a text, expectations resulting

from a wider and more varied reading experience. As Purves (1986) has shown, "good" student writers from different countries (students selected by their own instructors as being exemplary), when asked to write an essay on the same topic, write those essays in different rhetorical modes that vary in stance, descriptive quality, and levels of abstraction and concreteness. He notes that "the fact that the compositions come from 'good' students suggests that these students have learned and are applying the norms of their rhetorical community" (Purves, 1986, p. 43); these students have learned to conform to the expectations of the community in which they find themselves. Likewise, the ESL readers have negotiated between the norms of their native communities and the one in which they find themselves; these readers recognized the SWE patterns of organization in the NS essays.

If every time we face a student paper we do so with the expectations of SWE firmly in mind, and we expect to find a linear, deductive argument, our experience of reading ESL students' essays will be different from our experience of reading NS students'. Most ESL students, even those in "regular" (i.e., linguistically heterogeneous) college writing classes, have not learned to use the organizational patterns of U.S. academic prose. This does not mean they are "bad" writers or that their essays are "badly organized"; it could mean that they are very skillfully manipulating patterns of organization that we don't recognize. A reader with expectations shaped by SWE will not interact successfully (in Iser's terms) with such essays; ESL writers' essays will not trigger dialectic movements because they do not fulfill the reader's expectations.

If the "wandering viewpoint" is a way to describe the way in which the reader is present in the text, then a reader with SWE expectations continues to wander rather aimlessly in a text by an ESL writer because the reader cannot recognize the signposts left by the writer. (For instance, we have found that ESL writers tend to use a few distantly separated cohesive ties as a way of establishing coherence, something very uncommon in their NS peers' work.) Readers should allow themselves to be lost for a while, for readers who suspend judgment and thus become accustomed to recognizing a wider variety of rhetorical modes, will begin to alter their expectations, to widen them, a process which will ultimately permit them to interact with more types of texts, thereby enriching their reading processes.

In contrast, readers who rigidly insist on finding a set of distinct expectations met in every encounter with student writing squelch in themselves responses to different approaches to presenting and receiving ideas; in effect, they suppress new information. SWE, as a set of conventions, is itself a rigid and rather artificial stratum of English if, as Bakhtin (1975/1981) describes, all national languages are strained into social dialects, characteristic group behavior, a professional jargon, generic languages, languages of generations and age groups, tententious languages, languages of authorities, of various circles, and of passing fashions, languages that serve the specific sociopolitical purpose of the day (pp. 262-263). In this view, SWE is just a particular

stratification of English, the one privileged by and identified with academia, a sublanguage which, by its nature, is sociopolitical.

In demanding that ESL students write SWE and use a deductive, linear argument, we are asking them to situate themselves within a particular sociopolitical context, and we respond to and judge their writing according to how accurately they are able to do so. If students are not natives of this culture they will be less likely to signal satisfactorily to us, the readers, their understanding of their position within the English language as a sociopolitical construct; even if their writing is in more or less error-free English, they will still be writing according to the norms of their native communities. By asking these students to use our signals according to our expectations, we are not taking language to be "a system of abstract grammatical categories"; instead, we are at least implicitly understanding "language conceived as ideologically saturated, language as world view" (Bakhtin, 1975/1981, p. 271). We require our ESL students to share and reproduce in their writing our world view, one to which they are, of course, alien. Such instruction is composition as colonization.

CHANGING THE WAY WE READ, RESPOND, AND EVALUATE

In general we would argue that all teachers should become more like the ESL readers in our study, that they acquire the ability to suspend judgment, to allow the piece of writing at hand to develop slowly, like a photographic print, shading in the details. But what does this mean in practice? It may mean that teachers with ESL students should become familiar with rhetorical traditions their students bring with them (see Reid, 1989). It certainly means that we need to consciously suppress our desire to label ESL writers' work as "out of focus" or "lacking in organization."

In our regular freshman writing classes, for example, assignments written by writing program directors are given to the teachers to be distributed. These assignments often require the ESL students in these classes, many of whom are U.S. residents who have spoken English for five or fewer years, to use conventional SWE structures such as thesis paragraphs. The ESL students comply, at least superficially, with these conventions. Eventually, however, usually in the second or third paragraph, ESL students return to the organizational conventions of their native rhetorics. This return does not go unnoticed; based on our examination of hundreds of marked essays, when ESL students stop consciously attending to the formal concerns of SWE patterns and begin focusing on what they have to say, teachers begin to note "problems" of clarity, focus, and organization. We would argue that it is here, at this point of departure from SWE expectations, that readers should suspend judgment and read on for meaning. After reading the entire text, a teacher might suggest that the introductory thesis paragraph is superfluous, instead of noting that the rest of the essay doesn't live up to the promise of the introduction. Or the teacher might suggest alternatives to seemingly disembodied topic

sentences, alternatives that would meet the obligation of teaching the student how to produce passable prose that would not be dismissed, out of hand, by less open readers. In some cases, the teacher might not know how to respond to the text except by asking lots of questions about what the student was trying to say. In some situations we have known exactly where to help our ESL students; in others we have had only very vague ideas.

Perhaps the most common specific deviation from SWE expectations that we find in ESL students' papers is what seems like redundancy. Sometimes students seem to repeat themselves pointlessly or they seem to argue the same point in slightly different ways, paragraph after paragraph, each paragraph a modest addition or alteration of given information. We have chosen a similar structure for this chapter; we have argued for the same point, "that teachers should change the way they evaluate ESL writers' papers," in several ways. We hope our readers will be generous and recognize that we do so by trying to appeal separately to logic, the "facts" of research, the "authority" of theory and, finally, to our own personal experience—all of which are fairly standard "artistic" and "inartistic" proofs of Western classical rhetoric, although it might have been more traditional for us to have outlined our plan earlier in the text. More generosity is often needed when we read our students' texts.

One helpful strategy for reading seemingly redundant essays is to use a form of "topical structure" analysis like the one Connor and Farmer (1985) suggest as a revision strategy for writers. In its simple form, one circles, during the second reading, all of the grammatical subjects of all the independent clauses. Rereading the list of subjects can lead readers to revisions of their initial understanding of the essay as patterns of meaning that were not at first evident are revealed. Often the subjects seem to operate as higher-order cohesive devices. For example, one student (whose essay we used in our research) used thunder, or a variant thereof, as the subject of three very distantly removed sentences in his essay on the possibility of afterlife. Of course this bit of imagery stood out and it was fairly easy to recognize that the repetition seemed to operate as a device connecting distinct parts of his essay, but this was an essay that NS readers scored low because of its poor organization and that ESL readers scored high and found to be acceptably organized. Now, when we receive a paper like that one, we usually recognize its structure; we no longer make comments about its organization.

CONCLUSION

Research suggests that evaluative focus on sentence-level mechanics may be a waste of the teacher's time (Robb, Ross, & Shortreed, 1986) and confusing and even harmful to students (Land & Evans, 1987; Zamel, 1985). Thus, against all the forces that seem to keep our attention riveted on surface concerns, good pedagogy demands that we respond to larger features of our students' texts. As we learn to rid ourselves of surface-level tunnel vision, we will have to struggle against the forces that can lead us to rigid, oversimplified notions of how essays should be structured: rhetoric-level myopia.

Assuming that our responses to students' essays are intended to inform them in specific ways about how to make those pieces of writing (or the next ones) better, we can ask students to add to, delete from, or alter the paper; or we can let students know that they should keep up the good work. We have argued that teachers of ESL students should broaden their concept of what constitutes "good work" and that they should not automatically request additions of SWE features and deletions and modifications of everything else. In the end, because ESL texts customarily contain a lot of the "everything else," such practices should cut down on the amount of marking teachers feel they must do. At first (and even much later, especially when faced with high stacks of papers in the wee hours), reading "interactively" is hard work. It would be easy, in the midst of trying to figure out a particularly puzzling text, to dismiss the whole project as idealistic, impractical, or stupid and to return to the more comfortable, familiar mode of reading with narrow SWE rhetorical expectations.

To do so would be to ignore what is happening to our culture and our language: they are becoming more pluralistic, not coincidentally with the rise of English as the world language. If we are indeed part of a culture which admits change, this change will obviously appear at the linguistic level because one's epistemology underlies one's language. When our language changes, it is a sign that our way of thinking has changed. Unless we want to institute a structure like the Académie Française or the British Royal Academy, we have no choice but to recognize and examine the changes that are happening daily everywhere in order to see what we think now.

REFERENCES

- Ahrens, C. D. (1984). *Comparing composition skills of native and non-native born students at the junior high school level*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of California at Los Angeles.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The dialogic imagination* (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.). M. Holquist, Ed.). Austin: University of Texas Press. (Original work published 1975.)
- Carroll, P. (1982). Cohesion is not coherence. *TESOL Quarterly*, 16, 479-488.
- Connor, U. (1984). A study of cohesion and coherence in ESL students' writing. *Papers in Linguistics: International Journal of Human Communication*, 17, 301-316.
- Connor, U., & Farmer, M. (1985, April). *The teaching of topical structure analysis as a revision strategy: An exploratory study*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago.
- Fein, D. (1980). *A comparison of English and ESL compositions*. Unpublished master's thesis, University of California at Los Angeles.
- Giordano, J. (1976). Community mental health in a pluralistic society. *International Journal of Mental Health*, 5, 5-15.
- Halliday, M. A. K., & Hasan, R. (1976). *Cohesion in English*. London: Longman Group, Ltd.
- Haugen, E. (1986). Bilinguals have more fun! *Journal of English Linguistics*, 19, 106-120.
- Havighurst, R. J. (1978). Structural aspects of education and cultural pluralism. *Educational Research Quarterly*, 2, 5-19.
- Hinds, J. (1983). Contrastive rhetoric: Japanese and English. *Text*, 3, 183-195.
- Isler, W. (1978). *The act of reading: A theory of aesthetic response*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. (Original work published 1976.)
- Kaplan, R. B. (1966). Cultural thought patterns in intercultural education. *Language Learning*, 16, 1-20.
- Kaplan, R. B. (1983). Contrastive rhetoric: Some implications for the writing process. In A. Freedman, I. Pringle, & J. Yalden (Eds.), *Learning to write: First language/second language* (pp. 138-161). New York: Longman.