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Material, Educational, and Ideological Challenges of Teaching EFL Writing at the Turn of the Century

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ABSTRACT

A great deal of literature on teaching English writing focuses primarily on English dominant contexts. The particular situation of writing instruction in non-English dominant countries has received insufficient attention, especially in light of some of the claims for the role of writing coming from the "center" countries. English language teachers, particularly those teaching in non-English dominant countries, who give substantial attention in their courses to teaching writing in English face a number of challenges. This article discusses two main categories of challenges. In the first group are challenges writing teachers face daily, such as class size, time constraints, accommodating local needs, and coping with problems connected to lack of both teacher experience in teaching L2 writing and student training in L1 writing. In the second group are challenges of a more ideological nature that are perhaps less obvious but more powerful and far-reaching, including the need to justify the large investment required on the part of institutions and individuals in order to teach L2 writing, the right to resist center imposed materials and methods, the need for dialogue with students about the role of writing in their lives, and the need to make L2 writing enhance learner options rather than limit them so that for learners, writing in L2 becomes not a pointless additional burden but a powerful means of accomplishing personal goals.

KEYWORDS: academic writing, "center" countries, globalization, hegemony, identity, process approach, professional writing, voice.

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I. INTRODUCTION

While interest in L2 writing research and pedagogy is not new in non-English-dorninant countries (see Kaplan, 2000), the role of L2 English writing in the lives of students, teachers, and various professionals worldwide appears to have increased substantially in the last ten years. With this increased attention to EFL' writing comes a series of challenges for both institutions and individuals. In the rnain body of this article, I would like first to examine the types of challenges already created by the ernphasis on teaching EFL writing that has ernerged in sorne places relatively recently and then to explore a different set of challenges that I believe EFL writing teachers rnight need to consider as interest in EFL writing courses expands.

Evidence of the growing irnportance of English L2 writing turns up in both educational prograrns and in professional writing in non-English dorninant countries. Increasing nurnbers of newly developed English L2 writing courses and prograrns have sprouted up internationally where they did not exist before. (See Tarnopolsky, 2000, for an exarnple of newly developed English L2 writing prograrns in Ukraine, where a focus on writing had previously been practically non-existent). In professional settings, acadernics in a variety of disciplines are facing mounting pressure to publish internationally, and, at this time in history, for many acadernic disciplines, publishing internationally rneans, for better or for worse, publishing in English (Braine, 2000; Flowerdew 1999a, 1999b; Gosden, 1996).

That L2 English writing instruction is relatively new as an issue on the international scene is attested by the degree to which L2 literacy, particularly writing, has escaped relatively unscathed frorn the specific examination of critics of the globalization of English, such as Pennycook, Phillips, and Canagarajah (see, however, Canagarajah, forthcorning). While the role of English language generally in global, particularly post-colonial, contexts is being scrutinized and acadernic writing in English dorninant societies has been accused of rigidity and stodginess, discussion of the teaching of EFL writing has for the rnost part focused on how this rnight be approached most efficiently and effectively. Rarely, if ever, has the focus been on why this should be done at all and what the consequences rnight be for students. And the question of how this teaching can be done effectively has seemed to center on how fast the latest techniques (for example, process approaches or peer response), attitude (for example, anti-plagiarism or interest in developing "voice"), or technologies (for example, LANs or cornputer-based forms of instruction) can be introduced into EFL settings. Yet we are long past the time when we can innocently regard either English or literacy as unmitigated good. (See Bliesener, 2000 and Queniart, 2000 for discussions of resentrnent of English's dominance in European FL classroorns and efforts to create EuroTESOL to reflect local notions about English pedagogy rather than irnporting ideas frorn the English center countries).

In an academic setting, for example, one of the consequences of an increase in interest in writing is an increase in probability that the writing will be tested. And testing nearly always

brings with it the possibility of failure and the resulting exclusion of the failed students from some desired goal. In other words, with the Trojan horse of L2 English writing instruction probably comes the increased separation of learners into those who pass writing texts and those who do not. In a spiraling interaction of mutual reinforcement, once writing becomes important in academic settings, it becomes subject to testing; once writing is tested, its importance is further augmented.

A different kind of nefarious effect may arise in professional settings. Canagarajah (2000), for example, examines the traditionally vibrant intellectual lives of university professors in Sri Lanka, lives that revolve around oral discussions, where English writing has played a negligible role. Yet this oral intellectual life is invisible beyond these local discussions. In order to be seen internationally as having an intellectual life, these scholars are forced to abandon their traditional oral exchanges in favor of a focus on writing and publishing, again primarily in English. As a result, writing to a global audience potentially permanently displaces local conversations. And again responding to the increasing pressures to publish in English by so doing has, in turn, the effect of further contributing to the perception that learning to write in English is crucial. It would appear that pursuing the development of English L2 writing carries with it clear consequences for a number of elements in society.

Yet pointed discussions either of recently instituted or of well established EFL writing instruction internationally are made somewhat diffuse because of the varied contexts and purposes for this instruction. In some post-colonial contexts, instruction in business and professional writing in English may be instrumental in helping job seekers secure work. In academic contexts researchers in various disciplines may feel they need English writing instruction to develop access to international disciplinary discussions through publishing in English. English majors inpost-secondary schools, many of whom will become English teachers, may be (and maybe not) under pressure to write well in English as part of their teacher training. If post-secondary education takes place in English, as is the case in some post-colonial settings, secondary schools must train students to pass college entrance exams that include writing in English. Thus, the challenges faced by both L2 English writing teachers and L2 English writers vary widely by context and writing purpose.

Yet, despite these contextual variables, many similar concerns arise for L2 English writing teachers and will be taken up in the remainder of this article. On the one hand, there are the every day difficulties of which teachers and administrators are well aware: class size, time constraints, accommodation of local needs and conditions, and the need to cope with problems resulting from lack of both teacher experience in teaching L2 writing and student training in L1 writing. On the other hand, other more ideological challenges are less frequently considered and addressed: the need to justify the large institutional and individual investment required to teach L2 writing, the right to resist center imposed materials and methods, the need for dialogue with students about the role of writing in their lives, and the goal of making L2 writing enhance learner options rather than limit them.

II. ATTESTED CHALLENGES

In some instances a focus on writing and on imported techniques for developing writing skills in English have been met with students' pleasure and enthusiasm. Journal writing without grammatical correction on topics of daily concern for students seems to have been well received (e.g., in Japan, see Hirose, 2001). An experimental writing center developed at Hong Kong Polytechnic has also hooked student writers (Xiao, 2001). Even the withholding or elimination of the nemesis of (some) writing teachers and students, grammar correction, has been well accepted in some contexts (Truscott, 1999: 116).

However, introducing new L2 writing programs where previously writing had only been used to reinforce the development of oral language can create severe logistic tensions. In settings where grammar/translation styles of language instruction predominate, it is possible to have classes of 30, 50, possibly more. Classes of such size create insurmountable problems for writing teachers. While correcting grammar exercises for large numbers of students may be tedious and time consuming, giving appropriate and useful feedback on multiple drafts of texts by large numbers of students is simply not possible.

Even without large numbers, however, it is possible that educational ministries and program administrators who want to include L2 writing in schools may not be aware of the amount of time demanded of L2 writing teachers and/or may be unwilling to spend the amount of money it takes to have a writing program. For many students an invaluable feature of some writing programs is individual writing conferences with teachers. But teachers may well feel that because of the time conferences require, it is simply not possible to include conferencing as part of their teaching strategies.

Beyond issues of time and numbers of students, logistic tensions within the L2 English writing classroom itself include developing an understanding of and a strategy for accommodating local needs. For example, creating or experiencing real purposes for writing may be a reasonable goal in settings where English is the medium of daily communication. There, students can be asked to write real letters to the local newspaper and in this way perhaps work toward developing a sense of their broader English speaking audience. But these goals may be more difficult to achieve with less access to the target language in the surrounding environment, where there may be no English language newspaper to send letters to. Furthermore, no matter how persuasive recommendations for writing instruction methods and materials (often coming from the center) may be, they must be adapted to local possibilities. For example, peer responding may include making copies of student texts for peers to read; making copies may simply not always be feasible in all settings.

Finally, even in "center" or metropole countries until fairly recently, teacher training programs often did not include specific training in the teaching of writing (Kroll, 1993; Williams, 1995). In EFL settings it is possible that language teachers are drafted into teaching

writing without being fully aware of what teaching writing entails or how to irnplernent writing instruction. If writing textbooks are not available or difficult to get, novice writing teachers rnay feel even more at a loss.

Furthermore, while nearly all language teachers would be expected to have had experience speaking, listening, and reading, it is quite possible that few language teachers are writers thernselves, either in L1 or L2 and, as a result, have few experiential resources to draw on besides what they rnight have experienced in elernentary school with first language writing instruction, i.e., a focus on neatness, spelling, and grarnrnatical correctness. The challenge here, then, would appear to be for teacher trainers. In a kind of infinite regress, however, given a history of lack of focus on writing, the question becornes how teacher trainers will thernselves leam how to teach writing. At a minimum a reasonable position frorn which to begin both for teachers and for teacher trainers would seern to be to engage in sorne form of public writing thernselves, to reflect carefully on that experience, and to base classroorn decisions as far as possible on principle rather than only on habit, ***only*** reproducing what they thernselves once experienced.

Not only the teachers' training but also the educational backgrounds of the students need to be considered and accornrnodated or built upon. In countries without a tradition of teaching L1 writing, students may not bring to the EFL writing class rnuch sense of what is involved in creating extended prose or how to go about it, and EFL writing professionals cite the difficulty of FL writing instruction in non-English dorninant countries where students have had little experience with writing in L1 (Hirose, 2001). These students present the usual challenges of instructing any novice writers, such as the writers' lack of self-confidence about their ability to write as well as other potential difficulties for these writers: positioning what they write in relation to information from outside sources; knowing how rnuch support and of what kind is appropriate in defense of a position; finding the appropriate level of formality for the discourse context; having little experience with a variety of genres (for exarnple, essay writing versus research report writing) or discoursal rnodes (for exarnple, going beyond straight-forward narrative to exposition and argurnentation); knowing whether to trust and/or how to rnake use of peer feedback; thinking flexibly enough about audience so that the teacher is not the only audience considered for a piece of writing; seeing the value of drafting and revision; possibly developing "voice" in the FL writing (see, however, discussions about voice in FL writing in Rairnes & Zarnel, 1997; Ramanathan & Kaplan, 1996; and the 2001 special issue of the *Journal of Second Language Writing* devoted to questions of voice in L2 writing).

Whether or not students have had writing instruction in L1, they probably have had formal courses in the FL. If, as is the case, for exarnple, in the U.S. in rnost FL classroorns, that instruction focused prirnarily on oral skills and reading, it rnay be that the students regard writing as invariably subsidiary to speaking, listening, and reading.[2] Furthermore, it is possible that a focus on grarnrnatical correctness in written work in the FL or even in the L1 rnay lead students to regard the purpose of writing as being the production of grarnrnatically correct text. Beyond

these attitudinal issues, L2 writers, and their teachers, face additional, language-related challenges: How to move away from translating; how to use writing to leam the FL; how to write, if necessary, for a native reader of the L2 without much familiarity with that audience.

In addition, although FL learners rnay have had little experience with either L1 or L2 writing, as literate products of an educational system, these students have been reading in their first languages for years and have almost certainly absorbed first language rhetorical preferences. It is possible that the more imbued with first language rhetorical preferences the writer is, the greater distance that writer rnay need to go in order to adopt FL cultural and genre preferences in writing, and perhaps the greater resistance the writer rnay mount about going that distance. This rnay be particularly tme ofprofessionals with well established careers as writers in their L1s who are beginning to publish in L2. (See cases described by Hirvela & Belcher, 2001, and Ivanic & Camps, 2001).

III. ETHICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Against these various backgrounds, then, come questions equally difficult and possibly less often addressed. In some instances the purpose for leaming to write in the FL is clear, a desire, for example, to publish in English or perhaps a desire to study in an English-speaking country. But for a majority of English leamers world-wide, the purpose of learning to write in English rnay not be clear. If writing is seen as peripheral or irrelevant to students' educations, careers, or lives, this creates challenges of an entirely different nature. In these cases educational systems or individual writing teachers must decide exactly what the purpose is to be for teaching FL writing. Certainly the rhetoric surrounding the teaching of writing insists that learning to write can deliver myriad advantages. It is perhaps because of the assumption that writing brings such treasures with it that a frequently heard comment like "These students have never had writing instruction in their first languages" is sometimes made in a tone suggesting the speaker is scandalized by this sad state of affairs, perhaps even without having considered why such inexperience with writing rnay have reasonably been the case or why that should or should not change now.

However, the purported advantages of writing instmction do not come without both individual and social costs. The arguments here are similar to those about access to English in general. Individuals who leam to write in school settings are nearly invariably tested on their writing and are allowed to advance, or not, depending on the results. This also nearly invariably means that some are left behind. Those with access to better writing instmction, those who can afford private tutoring, for example, will advance farther and more easily. There is a cost to teachers as well; writing teachers must make enormous time investments to respond adequately to student writing. Finally, writing instmction is expensive on a broader plane. Since writing has been an important feature of education in North America for some time, texts and methodologies

are likely to flow from English dominant countries toward non-English dominant countries, with the accompanying outflow of money in the other direction and potential dependence on center thinking about writing. It is important to consider exactly whose purposes are being served in the drive to develop EFL writing programs.

In the U.S. teaching writing, whether L1 or L2, has spawned an enormous sub-economy of writing teachers, writing textbooks, writing proficiency exams, research on writing that supports journals devoted to writing —all with relatively little critica1 discussion of the core of the enterprise, i.e., why people need to sacrifice so much (and be sacrificed in the case of failing writing exams) at the altar of writing. Rather it has simply been asserted and taken for granted by many teachers and administrators that writing well (however that may be defined) constitutes an essential part of a proper education. Those with a vested interested in the teaching of writing can only be thrilled at the prospect of EFL writing instruction becoming entrenched in non-English dominant countries. This new development means more books will be sold, more native speakers of English can go abroad with their native expertise and teach writing, more exams of writing can be produced and sold. But focusing (always limited) resources on English writing instruction means taking those resources away from something else. I would argue that the first and greatest challenge EFL writing teachers or curriculum developers must face is to fully consider what the point is of investing heavily in teaching EFL writing. While it is true that in nearly all educational contexts, people make decisions about what other people need to learn and how well they must know it, because of the resources it demands, the benefits of FL writing instruction must be weighed against these costs. If the students themselves do not come to learning EFL writing with a sense of why they are doing it, then teachers' and administrators' must determine a principled justification for such a focus.

The possible lack of a sufficiently reflective stance with regard to EFL writing instruction is exemplified in a recent research article on teaching EFL writing in Turkey (Clachar, 2000). The research focused on the attitudes of a group of Turkish EFL writing teachers toward "Western writing pedagogy" (p. 66) with some teachers describing their acceptance of it; these teacher were characterized as being "in favor of exposing Turkish students to the rigors of Western scholarship" (p. 67). Other teachers, however, expressed their strong doubts about "Western writing pedagogy" and partly explained their students' difficulty with it by referring to their students' leamed deference to textual authority. One possible interpretation of these statements that cannot help but occur to, at least, North American readers (the typical audience of this particular journal) is that these Turkish students had difficulty learning from Western writing pedagogies because they were culturally unable to challenge authority, a dangerous stereotype. The article does not in fact make this interpretation but the interpretation is nevertheless made available to readers.[3]

The students who were on the receiving end of this methodological debate were "undergraduates in such fields as computer science, business administration, hotel management, psychology, biology, chemistry, physics, engineering, French, and German literature" (p. 71).

These students "were assigned to levels [of the writing classes] according to their scores on a placement exam and were required to complete the high-intermediate writing course if they entered at the beginning level and the advanced course if they entered at the high-intermediate level" (p. 71). What is somewhat amazing in the article is that nowhere do we leam why these students in Turkey, studying psychology, engineering, or even French and German literature, were required to take an English writing placement exam and to enroll in English language writing courses. It is entirely possible that this was an English medium school.[4] The point, however, is that neither the author, nor the editors, nor the reviewers appeared to have felt the need to have the article explain why such students would be required to take English writing courses. Why would it seem unnecessary to explain this situation? Perhaps because, to many professionally involved with writing instruction, taking English writing courses, no matter what the context, is so self-evidently appropriate that no explanation is called for. It is this kind of failure of imagination that presents a serious challenge to EFL writing teachers, the simple questioning of the appropriacy of and reasons for imposition of EFL writing instruction.

If there is no obvious reason to teach FL writing, if the students themselves do not see a reason to leam to write, and if, nevertheless, it is decided by teachers, administrators, or ministries of education that FL writing will be taught, the challenge then becomes engaging students in dialogue to explain this decision. Furthermore, particularly for writing teachers who are not natives of the students' culture, it would seem imperative to leam about the context in which this teaching will take place. That context includes students' previous experiences with both L1 and L2 writing instruction and their thoughts on such questions about writing as what rnakes writing good, how people become good writers, how good they themselves want to become at writing in English, and what kinds of texts they would like to be able to write well. Perhaps even more irnportant is a decision by the teachers/administrators about how they themselves will operationalize the term good writing and just how good the students will be required to become. These questions are tied in with the issue of whether EFL writing courses will be general or specific (Cumming, 2001). Will a goal of writing instruction be that students will learn to do specific writing tasks like write letters and fill out forms; will EFL writing primarily be a way of leaming and developing fluency in language; will EFL writing be used for professional purposes, to study or to publish in English; or will students be expected to be able to engage in self-exploration through this foreign language? Which of these (some or all) are reasonable goals for a specific student or group of students?

Another challenge that flows from the previous one is the need to consider when it is appropriate to resist the hegemony of English dominant countries in terms of both pedagogy and technology. In the last 20 years, writing pedagogy in the U.S. has evolved toward a near universal embrace of some or all of the features that characterize process approaches. As interest in process approaches spread to other parts of the world, research articles inevitably began to appear where researchers examined a site to determine whether process approaches were truly being implemented and then reported that what looked like a modern, sanctioned, embrace of

process approaches was not really taking place: It was not quite right; undemeath an appearance of correctness, i.e., using process approaches, really lay a persistent focus on grammar and vocabulary, or even spelling, for that matter. These findings of non-conformity are rarely oriented in the direction of describing it in terms of local adaptations to a methodology but rather in terms of failure to fully understand and/or implement the methodology correctly.

In interviews with writing teachers in six different countries, Cumming (forthcoming) found that nearly all these teachers described themselves as using a process approach to teaching writing. In response to this finding, Canagarajah has suggested[5] that in fact what was being referred to by the teachers as a process approach may well have included some local adaptation that might be considered a violation of process principles. If so, the challenge for those committing the "violation" may be to be able to stand by it if they feel it is called for as an appropnate adaptation to the local setting. With the long history in North Amenca of teaching writing and with the current economic power of the U.S. in particular to produce and market its intellectual wares worldwide with ease, it should not be surprising that new ideas on teaching writing might seem to appear first in North America. This may well put EFL writing teachers in other parts of the world, perhaps especially (though not necessarily) expatriate teachers of North American background, in the position of looking toward North America for imovation, perhaps adopting the imovation, and then regarding those who resist as old-fashioned, not up to the latest in teaching techniques, recalcitrant, as teachers who "even admit[ted] that they do pay a great deal of attention to grammar, spelling, and punctuation in their writing classes ... ". (Clachar, **2000:** 77). This is not to say that paying "a great deal ofattention to grammar, spelling, and punctuation" is better than not doing so. However, if after reflection these teachers find that paying such attention is appropriate for their students, why should they be described as "admitting" it, as though local adaptations made to the paradigm were something to be ashamed of? If globalization of North American intellectual products and processes is seemingly inevitable, surely critical wariness is part of an educated response to it. At a minimum, a careful analysis of local needs, goals, and possibilities would seem reasonable; Burnaby and Sun (1989) provide an example of the parameters of just such an analysis in reference to the adoption of communicative language teaching methods in China.[6]

A final challenge confronting teachers of EFL writing again focuses on the students. It is the challenge of meeting students where they are in terms of language and writing skill and taking them forward. The enterprise of foreign language writing is a double-edged sword. On one hand, because of their permanence, texts, even those written in L1, leave the writer unusually vulnerable to cnticism of the writer's ideas, style, and ability to manipulate language correctly and effectively. For writers educated and experienced enough to have established a writerly identity or voice in L1, the loss of one's accomplished textual voice under a blanket of awkward, incorrect, or insufficiently expressive or imaginative use of L2 may be especially discomfiting. On the other hand, writing may be the perfect vehicle for accomplishing the eventual construction of an appropriate and comfortable identity in the FL. In orally onented

classes or in reading classes, the students with lower proficiency levels may have a difficult time following the discussion or understanding the reading. They do not have control over the language being generated unless they themselves are speaking and if their proficiency is noticeably lower than that of the other students, they may be reluctant to speak or may find their audience impatient. But pen and paper (or keyboard) are patient, and flexible. They adapt to any level of English proficiency and bear any alterations or adjustments the writer might care to make. Writing instruction is arguably better suited than any other kind of language instruction to operating at the students' current level of proficiency without holding other students back. In this way given leamers' potentially limited access to the FL, writing also affords a salutary means for pushed FL output (Swain, 1985) that can be independent of any interlocutor. The challenge to at least some EFL writing teachers, then, may be not so much to find ways to implement process approaches and make their students leam English genres and rhetorical strategies but rather, if FL writing is to be a legitimate feature of students' education, to find ways to promote these students' linguistic and intellectual development by helping them to create L2 texts that cometo reflect their maturity and expertise, since writing, even L2 writing, gives them the leisure to reform the text to do so.

IV. CONCLUSION

Writing instruction would seem, then, to be a balancing act. Writers are singularly exposed in their writing, each error sitting there, each language limitation that results in lack of intellectual subtlety insidiously suggesting that the problem is not in language but in thinking. But, on the other hand, writing allows writers to take their time, to rework their words, to consult with others. To be done ethically and effectively, teaching L2 English writing first requires institutions and individuals to make heavy material investments of funds, time, focus, and energy. But if teachers and administrators can address the question of why L2 writing is being taught and leamed, challenge or resist where appropriate the hegemony of center ideas and techniques, take students where they are in their writing expertise and move them forward, and help leamers create texts that match their expanding intellectual abilities, L2 writing instruction can potentially equip leamers with a powerful tool to use in advancing their own purposes and interests.

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NOTES:

1. For the sake of simplicity I will use EFL in this chapter to refer to English instruction in countries outside of monolingual English speaking countries, where English is not the dominant language of the people and of public life. I realize that this usage creates distinct inaccuracies in reference to countries like Singapore, India, and Hong Kong. However, it is difficult to find unproblematic ways to refer to this teaching environment without creating inaccuracies.

2. It is an empirical question to what degree writing in FLs otherthan English is taught with a focus on varying FL genres and rhetorical structures.

3. My intention here is not to criticize the author or the teachers involved in this research project. Rather I hope to draw attention to what I see as a nefarious pattern —those who adopt center ideas are progressive, those who don't are suspect. Although Clachar appears to want to take a non-committal stance toward the attitudes expressed by the teachers, and although the teachers obviously had strong opinions about the writing program they taught in, there is no sense in this research report that these Turkish teachers, with their ambivalent or oppositional attitudes, had any input into the pedagogical approaches used in the writing pmgram (this appeared to have been decided by the British and American teacher training workshop leaders) or even into the question of whether to teach L2 writing, to what level of proficiency, and to which students.

4. Frorn the author's biographical note at the end of the article it is obvious that the school in question is, in fact, an English medium institution.

5. In an oral response to a conference presentation of Cumming's findings at the American Association of Applied Linguistics in Vancouver, Canada, March 2000.

6. As astutely pointed out by one of the anonymous reviewers of a draft of this manuscript, not all reasons for resisting change are the result of a self-confident refusal to allow outsiders to dictate how to teach, or how to live, but may instead simply be the reflection of a desire to do things as they have always been done. There is in addition the question of how much a method can be adapted before it is no longer that method at all.

The other side of this coin, however, is the case of, in particular, secondary school teachers who may find themselves caught between an interest in trying out innovative methods and rigid curricular guidelines that do not accommodate experimentation. Further, as Rosa M. Manchón asks, if these teachers do experiment, how are their innovations communicated to a broader public of, for example, applied linguists who might be in a better position to spread the word?

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