

# APPLYING THE PRINCIPLE OF NONJUDGMENTAL AWARENESS TO THE ESL WRITING CLASS

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One of the major concerns for ESL students enrolled in two- and four-year colleges is achieving proficiency in writing. These students are faced with writing tasks everyday, both in their English courses and in their mainstream courses. For many ESL students, expressing themselves in written English is a frightening experience, and in fact, many of them suffer from what Thomas calls the "I can't write English syndrome." Because writing in English represents such a major challenge to ESL students, instructors must work to make writing a more positive experience as these students develop and refine their English language skills.

Studies of both basic and ESL writers show us that instructor feedback plays a significant role in students' progress as writers (Kaplan Bass, Rose, Shaughnessy). As instructors, we help students become proficient writers by providing evaluative feedback designed to decrease writing anxiety as it increases writing satisfaction. I find that applying the principle of nonjudgmental awareness to my ESL writing classes helps my students become less anxious about and more satisfied with their writing, and leads to increased pass rates on final writing examinations.

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

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effectively and effortlessly when learners allow themselves to move naturally through the learning process, being 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 also been applied to learning skills in other domains. For example, Ploger and Carlock successfully used this principle to teach students to construct computer programs to represent ideas from biology.

In this paper, I offer a rationale for applying the principle of nonjudgmental awareness to the ESL writing class. To support its efficacy, I present data demonstrating that a nonjudgmental, expression-oriented approach to ESL writing results in higher student pass rates than does a judgmental, error-oriented approach. In addition, I describe ESL students' feedback indicating positive response to this approach as well as increased confidence in writing English.

## **Rationale for the Nonjudgmental Approach**

The approach to teaching writing in many ESL programs is quite different from that taken in most basic writing programs. Basic writing programs generally do not explicitly teach grammar. Rather, they apply a process approach to writing, emphasizing the development of ideas and gradually placing greater responsibility on students as they go through the writing process. In this type of approach, writing becomes a process of discovery in which "ideas are generated and not just transcribed" (Susser, 35).

In contrast, many ESL programs use a product approach to writing in which the product of the ESL writer becomes more important than the process by which it was created. Product-driven ESL writing programs focus students' attention on grammatical correctness. Instructors provide students with accurate models of language so that students may then produce fluent and clear written pieces. Thus, correctness becomes the prerequisite to fluency and clarity in writing.

The rationale for such a product-driven approach is that ESL students are often required to pass college writing assessment examinations that judge student writing on the

basis of grammatical accuracy (Ruetten). In fact, for students to be successful on these examinations, Sweedler-Brown believes that instructors must directly address grammar in the ESL writing course.

Unfortunately, the danger here is that the acquisition of accurate grammatical skill often becomes the major goal in teaching ESL writing. Students are continually provided with more grammar and more correction. The priority in writing instruction then 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.

When instructors apply an error-oriented, product approach to ESL writing, they focus attention on the mistakes that the student makes in writing in L2. Students become overly preoccupied with placing every bit of language in its correct place, and what gets lost in the process is the free-flowing expression of ideas (Perl). When instructors focus on correctness, ESL students may become so concerned with avoiding errors that they refuse to take chances in their writing. This attitude stifles creativity of expression, and has a crippling effect on the generation of new ideas and on the satisfaction that students get from writing.

In fact, for many ESL students, evaluation of their writing by their instructors is equivalent to judgment of their overall skill in L2. This awareness of judgment further increases writing anxiety and frustration (Kaplan Bass), and may lead to an even greater number of form and structure errors. Thus, the focus placed on correctness in the error-oriented, product approach is actually counterproductive to developing proficiency in ESL writing.

The results of a study conducted by MacGowan-Gilhooly demonstrate how counterproductive an error-oriented approach may actually be. She found that when the ESL writing course focused on developing enhanced fluency and clarity, students made great progress. In contrast, when the writing course focused on producing grammatical correctness for the purpose of preparing ESL students to pass a college writing assessment test, they did not progress as well, and some actually regressed. Thus, students who were writing well at a

previous level of instruction actually took a step backward when they needed to be more concerned with how they said something than with what they had to say. MacGowan-Gilhooly attributes this regression to the pressure produced by writing for evaluation where that evaluation depends upon correctness of language rather than upon quality of content.

Applying the principle of nonjudgmental awareness to the ESL writing class creates a climate in which students are encouraged to become aware of the relevant aspects of their writing performance. These relevant aspects include both their strengths and their weaknesses as writers. Further, ESL students are acknowledged for what they do well and are not judged for what they do not do well (Bernhardt).

Finally, by taking a nonjudgmental approach, ESL instructors can help make writing enjoyable, thereby decreasing students' anxiety and frustration and increasing their motivation to write. Student motivation is an important factor in improving performance. Students usually do better at tasks they enjoy than at those they do not enjoy. Westphal Irwin defines motivation in terms of the relationship between the amount of effort required to perform the task and the rewards obtained from the task. Motivation can be increased by increasing the expected reward or by decreasing the expected effort. The greatest amount of motivation results from doing both of these things. Therefore, if we use nonjudgmental techniques that encourage our students to feel successful with minimal effort, we may be able to forestall the frustration that many ESL students feel when they write English.

## **Nonjudgmental Techniques**

In this section I describe the nonjudgmental techniques that I have used to help my ESL students become more proficient English language writers. The first of these techniques is based on MacGowan-Gilhooly's "Fluency First" model of ESL instruction, which advocates developing fluency and clarity before correctness. The second technique suggests providing instructor feedback via task-oriented questions designed to give students suggestions on how to improve the content and the clarity of their written work. Finally, the third

involves teaching students to vocalize thoughts when they have trouble writing.

### *Developing Fluency and Clarity*

In a nonjudgmental approach, conveying meaning becomes the priority. The nonjudgmental approach maintains that achieving fluency and clarity of ideas is a prerequisite to attaining correctness of form. Clarity of expression goes hand in hand with grammatical accuracy. Very simply put, if ideas are expressed clearly and fluently, the sentences will not contain major language errors. Although there may be some minor grammatical errors, these errors will not be serious enough to obscure meaning.

Thus, teaching grammar rules and correcting specific student errors does not translate into improved overall writing skill, because language is not static. The goal of expression in each individual composition determines the appropriate structure and form of the language used in that piece. The goal of expression must take priority over the correctness of form.

Although correctness of form does play a role in the nonjudgmental approach to ESL writing, this approach views grammar not as a skill that is taught by the instructor, but rather as one that is acquired by the learner. Instructor feedback is aimed at helping students improve fluency and clarity of expression. In the process of continually working to express their ideas more clearly and more fluently, ESL students increase their own grammatical competence as they become aware of the errors which obscure meaning. Students become more responsible for their own learning because they, rather than the instructor, are ultimately responsible for refining the product of that learning. Research has shown that when students are provided with feedback which encourages them to take an active role in their own learning, performance is significantly enhanced (Weinstein).

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

I have found task-oriented questions to be very useful in helping my ESL students improve their own writing. Whereas

instructors who correct errors in ESL students' writing often change the meaning and the flavor of that writing (Petrello), task-oriented questions direct students' attention to ways in which they themselves may improve the content and the clarity of the ideas they are trying to express. Examples of task-oriented questions I have used are: "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 my ESL students focus on improving and expanding the content of their essays and increasing the clarity of their ideas, thereby enabling them to become better writers.

### *Teaching Students to Vocalize Thoughts*

I have also found that teaching students to vocalize thoughts helps them to get past writing blocks. In the following statement from his work *Writing Without Teachers*, Peter Elbow points 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, I circulate around the room to check work or offer assistance. If I notice an error or a confusion in writing, I ask the student, "What did you want to say here?" More often than not, students can tell me in relatively correct English what they had intended to say. I then suggest that they write what they have just said. 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. If we can get our students to think of how they would express their ideas orally and then transfer that oral expression to the written form, we may be able to demystify the writing process and help students improve their own writing. I have found that when my 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.

## **The Effectiveness of a Nonjudgmental Approach**

I will now present data that support the effectiveness of a nonjudgmental approach in improving ESL students' writing performance. These data show that, over a period of three semesters, as my intermediate level ESL writing class became less error-oriented and more expression-oriented, a progressively greater number of my students passed the final writing examination. This final writing examination gave students two hours to plan, write, and revise a persuasive essay on their choice of three assigned topics based on the work done during the semester. Students received either a P (Pass) or an R (Repeat) on this examination. Those who received an R had to repeat the writing course. The criteria for receiving a P on the writing final included appropriate organization of content, fluency and clarity of expression, and grammatical correctness. To increase objectivity in grading, the writing finals were cross-graded by two other ESL instructors in the department.

### ***Final Examination Results: Moving From an Error-Oriented to a Nonjudgmental Approach***

In the first semester of my study, I used a total-error correction technique and corrected all the errors my students made in their writing. I told them what to correct and how to correct it, and they incorporated these changes into the next draft, following this procedure until they had produced a relatively error-free draft. At the end of the first semester, only 61 percent of my students passed the final writing test.

Because it was clear that my instructor-generated corrections had not translated into better writing skills for my students, and because I was not satisfied with the first semester pass rate, I changed my approach in the second semester. I now corrected only about one-half of the errors made, while I simply circled, but did not correct, the other half of the errors made. I also wrote some comments suggesting changes that needed to be made to clarify meaning. As they had in the first semester,

students completed several drafts of each essay. This semester represented a transition from an error-oriented approach to a nonjudgmental approach. At the end of this second, transitional semester, the percentage of students who passed the writing final increased to 82 percent.

The third semester brought yet another change to my approach. During this semester, I simply identified errors by circling them, or for more complex errors, by marking them with editorial symbols (e.g., wf (word form), wo (word order)), and I insisted that students correct the errors themselves. I also wrote extensive task-oriented questions and comments on their essays. When my students struggled with their writing, I encouraged them to think about the ideas they wanted to express, and to try to express those ideas orally. During the third semester, I placed the greatest emphasis on fluency and clarity of expression. Students completed several drafts of each essay, focusing on making each one clearer and more specific. The pass rate on the writing final exam for the third semester increased again to 89 percent.

While Bernard Susser has noted the concern of some researchers that a process-based, nonjudgmental approach emphasizes fluency at the expense of accuracy, my results refute this concern and support the effectiveness of the nonjudgmental approach to ESL writing instruction. Although grammatical correctness was one of the criteria for achieving a passing grade on the writing final, the number of my students who passed this test rose as I provided less grammatical feedback during the semester. In fact, my students made the greatest progress in expressing themselves fluently, clearly, and correctly when they themselves assumed the most responsibility for their own learning.

### *Student Feedback on the Nonjudgmental Approach*

Because the nonjudgmental approach to writing represents a departure from standard ESL methodology, I was very interested in my students' reactions to it. Therefore, I asked them to complete two feedback exercises: a writing evaluation questionnaire and a writing autobiography. Both of these were completed during the last week of the third semester by a total of forty students from two intermediate level ESL classes.



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.

The writing autobiography was the last essay my students composed before taking their writing final. The writing autobiography question sheet, adapted from one used by Sandman and Weiser (19), asked students to describe positive and negative experiences in writing English, as well as what they believed to be their strengths and weaknesses as writers. In addition to the three questions suggested by Sandman and Weiser, I also asked my students the following questions: 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?

My 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 having 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 indicate that when ESL students focus on expressing their ideas they find writing to be a positive experience. In contrast, when students focus on producing correct language, they concentrate on their perceived weaknesses, their ideas are stifled, and writing becomes 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. Rather, their responses focused on weaknesses in conveying meaning, such as difficulty in organizing their thoughts or in writing an effective introduction or conclusion.

If the nonjudgmental approach is to lead to more confident and productive ESL writers, it must result in increased confidence and decreased anxiety. My students' feedback on the question of what they had learned that semester about their ability as writers demonstrated that my nonjudgmental approach had achieved this goal. One response predominated in each of the essays: my students had learned that they were able to express 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.

Some of the individual responses I obtained were: "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 my nonjudgmental, process approach also helped my ESL students learn the value of revision. My students were encouraged to refine ideas, not just correct language in their revisions, and many commented that writing an essay several times had helped them to develop their ideas. As these intermediate level ESL students revised their work, they themselves discovered

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 to generate new ideas. In fact, they often think that their first draft contains all their ideas and that revising an essay simply means making the first draft neater by correcting language errors. This, in fact, is exactly what my students had done when I adopted an error-oriented, product approach to writing. In contrast, when I adopted an expression-oriented, process approach, my students learned how to refine their ideas, and so became better writers. Moreover, in the process of revision, my students discovered not only that they could write English, but also that writing itself became easier and more satisfying with each subsequent revision.

The results of my study support the efficacy of the nonjudgmental, process approach to ESL writing. 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. My 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 would minimize language errors. As a result, they became less intimidated by their mistakes.

## **Conclusion**

For years, basic writing programs have focused on refining writing skills through a step-by-step process in which writers are encouraged to develop and expand upon ideas and are

ultimately responsible for their 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 us to them. Applying the principle of nonjudgmental awareness to the ESL writing class achieves this goal by making communicative competence, rather than grammatical accuracy, the primary focus of instruction. ESL students ultimately become better writers when they are encouraged to get their ideas out and onto the paper, not when they are so concerned with word form or verb tense that their ideas are stifled and lost in the process.

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