Writing: The Process of Discovering Meaning

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Writing: The Process of Discovering Meaning

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Until quite recently research on composition and the classroom practices that it influenced focused on the written products that students composed. Researchers and writing teachers, realizing that this focus on product did not take into account the act of writing itself, therefore began to investigate the process of composing. This research has both identified the complex nature of the composing process and raised questions about past approaches to the teaching of writing. A study of the composing processes of proficient ESL writers corroborates the findings of this research and likewise challenges ESL writing pedagogy.

Since writers do not seem to know beforehand what it is they will say, writing is a process through which meaning is created. This suggests composition instruction that recognizes the importance of generating, formulating, and refining one's ideas. It implies that revision should become the main component of this instruction, that writing teachers should intervene throughout the process, and that students should learn to view their writing as someone else's reading. Methods that emphasize form and correctness ignore how ideas get explored through writing and fail to teach students that writing is essentially a process of discovery.

Research on composition has traditionally been concerned with the written product. The studies reported by Braddock et al. (1963) reflect this concern since, by and large, researchers investigated the effects that certain teaching methodologies had on writing. In many cases these studies sought to prove the efficacy of one grammar over another, thus perpetuating the belief that a better pedagogical approach, particularly one that focused on usage, structure, or correct form, would improve writing.

Since this line of research depended upon the evaluation of compositions that students wrote after having received certain types of instruction, little attention was paid to other, more important considerations such as purpose, audience, and the process of composing itself. Questions dealing with why or for whom students were writing were not taken into account. The whole notion of how writers write—where ideas come from, how they are formulated and developed, what the various stages of composing entail—was ignored. And this state of the art was both influenced by and, in turn, influenced classroom practices and the textbooks that were written (Young 1978: 31-2). Given the emphasis on the composed product, teach-
ers adopted methods and materials they assumed would positively influence their students' writing.

Recently, however, the focus of research on composition has shifted. Rather than investigating what students write, teachers and researchers are beginning to study the composing process itself. They are now working under the assumption that before we know how to teach writing, we must first understand how we write. And what they are finding out about this process seriously challenges the ways in which composition has been taught in the past. The composing process seems to be an extremely complex undertaking, the nature of which "militate[s] against prescriptive approaches to the teaching of writing" (Witte and Faigley 1981: 202); it involves much more than studying a particular grammar, analyzing and imitating rhetorical models, or outlining what it is one plans to say. The process involves not only the act of writing itself, but prewriting and re-writing, all of which are interdependent.

ESL teachers concerned with language acquisition and error analysis emphasize, even more than other writing teachers, correctness and form. Widdowson (1978) is particularly critical of ESL teaching practices because they focus upon usage rather than real communication. A cursory look at ESL composition texts indicates that, for the most part, writing assignments are made for the sole purpose of testing the mastery of specific grammatical structures and that few involve invention techniques or prewriting strategies. Furthermore, research on ESL composition is almost negligible. Those few studies that do exist are directed towards investigating the effects of certain types of writing practice on compositions, thereby still indicating a concern with product (see, for example, Konneker and Perkins 1981). It is therefore important that ESL teachers of writing take into account the current findings in research on composition. While this point has been made before (Zamel 1976), it is especially appropriate now, given the absence of our own research and our continuing emphasis on the surface features of writing.

1. Research on the Composing Process

Janet Emig's (1971) classic study represented one of the first attempts to investigate what writers do when they compose. Adopting a case-study approach, which in and of itself was a break from the more traditional experimental designs, she discovered how naive our past assumptions about composing had been. While composing, students seemed to exhibit a variety of behaviors, all of which indicated the nonlinear nature of writing. Emig therefore concluded that teachers of composition tend to "underconceptualize and oversimplify the process of composing" (1971: 98).

Perhaps one of Emig's most important findings was that writing involved a continuing attempt to discover what it is one wanted to say. It is this act of discovery that Murray (1978, 1980) has identified as the
main feature of the writing process. While this process entails several stages, such as "rehearsing," "drafting" and "revising" (Murray 1980: 4-5), these stages interact together and repeatedly in order to discover meaning. Writing viewed from this perspective is the process of exploring one's thoughts and learning from the act of writing itself what these thoughts are. Rather than being the development of some preconceived and well-formed idea, writing is "the record of an idea developing. [It] is a process whereby an initial idea gets extended and refined" (Shaughnessy 1977: 234). As one writes and rewrites, thereby approximating more closely and more accurately one's intended meaning, the form with which to express this meaning suggests itself. Given this definition of composing, the shortcomings of traditional approaches to teaching composition become obvious. Requiring students to formulate their ideas beforehand, to elaborate upon them by using some prescribed rhetorical framework and to submit these written products for grading purposes seems to ignore everything we have learned about the process.

Sondra Perl (1980a), again using the case-study approach of the current research paradigm, found that even unskilled writers employ consistent and stable composing strategies which represent their attempts to discover meaning. "Through the act of seeing their ideas on paper, students are enabled to reflect upon them and develop them further" (Perl 1980a: 24). In this way, these unskilled writers, reexamining what they had already written in order to discover the direction of their thoughts, were using behaviors identified by other researchers:

We [shape] the utterances as we write; and when the seam is 'played out' or we are interrupted, we get started again by reading what we have written. (Brotton 1978: 24)

Perl also found that writing was affected by the mode of discourse specified. Students wrote more and with greater fluency and satisfaction when their writing involved them personally, while they wrote with less facility when the writing was more objectified (1980a: 30-1). This is certainly an important finding, given that the purpose of most assigned writing seems to be the transmission of objectively described information for the teacher (Britton 1978: 15).

Perl went on to study the writing strategies of more proficient writers and again observed the recursive nature of the writing process, that is, that writers go back in order to move forward. She reiterates the notion of writing as discovery:

When we are successful at this process, we end up with a product that teaches us something, that clarifies what we know (or what we know at one point only implicitly), and that lifts out or explicates or enlarges our experience. (Perl 1980b: 368)
While Perl indicates that all writers, both skilled and unskilled, use what she calls retrospective structuring in order to discover, less skilled writers who view composing as more mechanical and formulaic are so inhibited by their concerns with correctness and form that they can not get beyond the surface in order to anticipate the needs and expectations of their readers (1980b: 368). This ability to project oneself into the role of another reader, what she calls projective structuring, is a skill that most beginning writers lack and another important aspect of the composing process (see, for example, Barritt and Kroll 1978, Brostoff and Beyer 1980, Emig 1978, Flower 1979, Judy 1980).

Sommers (1980), like Perl, studied the writing strategies of less experienced and more experienced writers. While she focused on revision, one should bear in mind that revision and writing were being viewed, as most researchers now view them, as interchangeable terms. She found that less skilled writers revised in the most limited way; they were basically concerned with lexicon and teacher-generated rules and rarely modified ideas that had already been written down. While the unskilled writers in Perl's study (1980a) seemed to understand that writing is a process that involves constant revision, it should be pointed out that they too were concerned almost constantly with form, usage, and grammar. Unlike these writers, the more experienced writers observed by Sommers viewed their writing from a more global perspective. In the process of discovering meaning, these experienced writers changed whole chunks of discourse, and each of these changes represented a reordering of the whole. Sommers concluded that "it is a sense of writing as discovery—a repeated process of beginning over again, starting out new—that the less experienced students failed to have" (1980: 387).

Perl and Sommers both suggest that inexperienced writers pay so much undue attention to form that the ongoing process of discovery is constantly interrupted. As Perl put it, "premature and rigid attempts to correct and edit their work truncate the flow of composing" (1980a: 22). Rose (1980) arrives at the same conclusion after investigating why certain writers experience writer's block. Like Perl's unskilled basic writers and Sommers' less experienced writers, Rose's "blockers" felt restricted by "writing rules or planning strategies that impeded rather than enhanced the composing process" (1980: 390). The "non-blockers," on the other hand, while operating according to certain rules and plans, were also aware that these rules and plans are subject to modification. It is this flexibility that allowed these writers to re-view what they had written and shift directions when necessary. Thus, when writing is experienced as the mechanical act of transcribing one's ideas, when the language itself rather than "the purposes for which the language is used" becomes the focus (Britton 1978: 24), when production becomes more important than meaning (Barritt and Kroll 1978: 52), when attention to form becomes the "dominant and ab-
sorbing activity” (Emig 1978: 62), the act of writing as discovery cannot be explored. Halsted (1975: 82) comments, “The obsession with the final product . . . is what ultimately leads to serious writing block. More importantly, it is a sure way to close off avenues to discovering what it is you have to say.”

2. The Composing Process of Proficient ESL Writers

While the research thus far reported has taught us a great deal about the composing processes of both less proficient and more proficient writers, it became important to investigate to what extent the findings apply to ESL writers. Are ESL students experiencing writing as a creative act of discovery, or are they attending so much to language and correct form that writing is reduced to a mechanical exercise? How do these students generate their ideas? What happens after these ideas are written down? What does a record of their writing, (from the initial notes to the final draft), indicate about their writing experiences?

These are some of the questions I tried to answer. As in the other process studies, a case-study approach was adopted. Eight ESL students (one Japanese, one Hispanic, two Arabic, two Italian, and two Greek) were interviewed individually about their writing experiences and behaviors. Different stages of their writing were also studied to determine whether their actual writing reflected the experiences that were reported. These ESL students were proficient to the extent that they were no longer enrolled in ESL writing courses and were successfully completing the writing assigned in university-level content area courses. While their writing still indicated some linguistic idiosyncracies, it was basically free of the kind of language related errors that can obfuscate meaning and demonstrated almost total control of organizational skills. Proficient writers were used for this study not only in order to find out whether their writing experiences resemble those of other writers, but also because it is by studying the composing processes of skilled ESL writers that we can begin to evaluate whether our teaching methods and approaches promote and reinforce these processes or inhibit and undermine them.

An important dimension of the writing process involves the period before the actual writing begins, that is, how writers get and form ideas before putting pen to paper. All of the students talked about the importance of classroom discussion specifically related to a particular topic and how these discussions helped them delineate their ideas. Several mentioned the frustrations they felt, as beginning writers, when they were assigned a paper that was totally unrelated to what had been discussed.

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1 It should be noted that while self-reports are generally recognized as methodologically less rigorous than the “talk-aloud” or observation methods adopted by composing process researchers, interviews were used here as a preliminary attempt to gain insight into ESL composing processes. In order to understand fully what these processes entail, therefore, studies similar to those reported earlier need to be undertaken.
in class or one that they had no interest in writing about. This raised another important issue, whether or not they had preferences for specific types of discourse. While they indicated that writing about what they knew was important when they first were learning to compose, they by and large now preferred more objective, informationally-based assignments. One student, recalling some of his first ESL writing assignments, thought that personal matters were “none of my teacher’s business,” while another exclaimed, “My teacher is not a confessor, preacher, or psychologist!”

Since these students are now taking courses which require papers that may only be peripherally related to the lectures and discussions, they talked about the strategies they now use to generate their ideas. While at first they may just read and reread course materials until they experience what Perl (1980b) calls a “felt sense,” what may happen at this point is quite intriguing. Several students reported having some sort of internal dialogue, “a conversation with an invisible person,” as one student put it, in order to figure out how to proceed.

Once the actual writing begins, it may take the form of some sketchy notes or fully articulated sentences and paragraphs. Only one student reported using a formal outline and depending upon it in order to write. This student indicated a still-felt insecurity with English and didn’t feel confident enough to compose without resorting to a fairly complex outline. While the use of this outline gave him a sense of control, he did admit that once the outline was completed, he found the actual writing both boring and mechanical. One can not help but speculate, since his writing was fairly accomplished, as to whether he really needed the outline or whether he had learned his English teacher’s lessons too well. One other student reported writing an outline, but not necessarily using it: “Very often the paper I wind up with is different from the outline. I don’t see the missing pieces when I write the outline. I can’t anticipate what’s going to go wrong in my logic when I do the outline.” The other students never wrote outlines, although two recalled courses in which they wrote outlines after they wrote the papers in order to comply with their teachers’ assignments. One student asked, “How can I write an outline when my ideas are flying back and forth?,” while another indicated that only “when the material falls together, I discover my outline.”

These students talked about writing down ideas, rethinking them, and then writing some more, not exactly sure of what would next appear on the paper. They discussed the thinking they do about their writing even as they are involved in the most mundane activities, for example, washing the dishes or getting ready for bed. They mentioned needing a great deal of time not only to actually write, but also to leave their writing and come back to it again and again and reread it in order to go on. As one student put it, “The more days go by, the more ideas come. It’s like fruit;
it needs time to ripen.” For some students the inner dialogue that began prior to the actual writing continues as they reread their papers. As one student indicated, “It’s through the conversation with myself that I learn what I’m going to say.” This dialogue also allows them to “hear” and thereby evaluate the clarity of their writing. One student resorts to using her hands while she reads her writing aloud, as if she were talking to somebody else. As they reread what they have written, they may experience a sense of dissatisfaction, at which point they may have to make partial changes or start anew. If, however, what they have written expresses what they intended to say, they continue writing, finding out in the process what they will say next. These activities do not take place in a series of stages, but rather are transactional and overlapping. Thus, new insights can occur at almost any time during the process, thereby creating the need for more time for the incubation of these ideas (Britton 1978: 23). While the students talked about the pain involved in the act of writing, they also discussed the feeling of accomplishment they experience when they are satisfied with what they have written. This satisfaction derives not only from the accomplishment itself, but from the knowledge that another reader will be able to appreciate the product of all these efforts. As one student indicated: “When I write, I keep in mind the reader. The professor is not the reader because he has heard it a million times before. . . . My reader is an imaginary person who may not know something about which I write. You have to think that you are informing somebody even though this person never sees it.”

An interesting discovery was made when the most proficient writer, a graduate student of English, admitted to writing first in her own native language and then translating into English. None of the other students used translation except when they were stuck, couldn’t think of a particular word in English and, in order not to lose their thread of thought, put down the word or expression in their own language. Otherwise, they reacted negatively to the idea of translation. As one student hypothesized, “It would be like being pulled by two brains.” This student in resorting to translation, however, did not in fact contradict any of the experiences reported by the other students; rather, it corroborated the fact that writing and creating seem to be simultaneous and reciprocal. She explained that for her writing had to be continuous. If she had to stop because she lacked a particular vocabulary word, she lost the flow of thought and this made her anxious. “When I write in my own language, I feel great because I can express my writing as part of myself. It’s like painting. It materializes on a piece of paper, and other people can share what I feel.” Many of the students comments reflected the same idea, that writing provides a means for discovering, creating, and giving form to ones thoughts and ideas. The students themselves articulated it best: “I have in my mind some general ideas. I don’t know where I’m going to end. By rereading, the
direction, although shapeless, comes to my mind. . ." And, "Writing helps me assess the clarity of my ideas. When I have a new idea, I try to write it as soon as possible because this is a way of checking if my ideas are clear or confused." Again, "When I go back to my writing, I often find that the order of ideas that I planned get reversed. As soon as you are writing and your ideas are coming, you realize that secondary arguments become primary. I don't know why this happens."

The following longer excerpt was written by one of the students who was so fascinated by the interview that she gave further serious thought to her composing experiences:

Whenever I'm to write something, the material is an amorphous mass in my head; it seems a very scary and threatening task. How am I going to deal with that—to make sense out of this lump of information? I spend a lot of time thinking about that—when I drive, eat, before I go to sleep, and generally when I'm not engaged in any other intellectual activity.

Progressively, by thinking about it, the amorphous mass channels itself in a very crude manner. Then, I take pen and paper and write down my thoughts; seeing them is very helpful; they are in a very raw stage, but nevertheless, it is a concrete start. Usually, I spare [sic] a lot of paper in writing just about everything that comes into mind; this way, the ideas flow without me realizing that I had them in the first place.

At this point, I have to remove myself from my writing. I find it helpful, even for five minutes; but I don't want to stay away too long for I won't be interested to continue working on it with the same zest. The most I can remove myself from it is a day. When I do return to it, I read it, and most of the time I do some more writing—add some things and/or cut others. From there, I start organizing, maybe develop an outline, which I don't find always necessary—a well organized summary will do it.

Before the final organization of the paper, I have to remove myself from it once more. When I resume my writing, it is in its final stages of completion. This is the time when I need a large 'chunk' of time uninterrupted because I want to have a total command for the material without leaving any possible holes. When I feel that there's nothing more I could do to make it more of a complete piece, I leave it again—to simmer.

When I return to it, I do it with a colored pen and read it very critically; at this point, I edit it—a process which may bring some changes but they are usually small; then, I type it.

After all this process is finished, I usually have a pretty decent paper. I need the time away from it because when I return, I see it with a clearer mind—the time away from it helps me discard the overfamiliarity with the subject and as a consequence, I have a more objective approach. Depending upon the subject I'm writing, the time chunks, and how often I have to remove myself from it varies a great deal—the shorter the paper, the shorter the time I need, and, of course, the simpler the subject, the shorter time I need to write it. Generally though, in order to write something and enjoy doing it by putting the best of my efforts, I have to identify with it—either oppose or support. In short, my writing seems to take the developmental process that of a fetus; it begins as an amorphous mass and slowly shapes itself. Eventually, it develops to what it supposes to be, my finished written work—my baby.
As this account indicates, writing about the process itself seems to have given her further insight into the process.

An examination of these students' written papers, which included all of their written attempts to deal with a particular course-related topic, from their first notes to the final copy, attested to the creative nature of the writing process as it was described during the interviews. All of the students wrote several drafts, indicating their struggle to discover and approximate meaning. Even the one student who adhered rigidly to his outline wrote two outlines and no less than three prose drafts. But while he made corrections in his drafts that were basically at the lexical and syntactic level, the other students made changes that were more radical. First drafts contained entire paragraphs that were deleted and rewritten. Paragraphs that appear on separate pieces of paper were added to pages that had already been completed. Some writers used their own symbols to indicate where information was missing. Other writers wrote themselves marginal comments. Second and even third drafts indicated changes of the same magnitude, but much fewer of them. More sentence-level and syntactic concerns seem to have been attended to, although these were addressed from the outset. Final parts of sentences were crossed out and reworded as if the authors realized in midstream that what they ended up expressing was not what they had intended. Some sentences were totally rewritten so that the relationship between the preceding sentence and the one that followed became more logical and clearer. As students got closer to the final product they were proofreading and polishing their texts. Changes in sentence structure were much more numerous. Vocabulary, tense, and punctuation were frequently focused on. Inflections were added where they had been omitted before. All in all, the different versions of their writing serve as a tangible record of how their ideas got generated, clarified, rearticulated, and refined.

3. Implications for Teaching

It is quite clear that ESL writers who are ready to compose and express their ideas use strategies similar to those used by native speakers of English. Their writing behaviors suggest approaches to the teaching of composition that ESL teachers may have felt were only appropriate for native speakers but which, in fact, may be effective for teaching all levels of writing, including ESL composition.

Students first of all need ideas to explore and write about. While more skilled writers have established certain methods that allow them to proceed with this exploration, less proficient writers need to be taught how to make use of prewriting strategies or invention techniques. As Shaughnessy points out, "Instruction in writing must begin with the more fundamental processes whereby writers get their thoughts in the first place and then get them underway" (1977: 245). An instructional method based on
the traditional read-analyze-write model of teaching composition ignores this crucial aspect of the composing process. It fails to take into account that students need the opportunity to "talk about, to expand and even to relearn or reexamine their experiences . . . prior to writing" (Judy 1980: 39). Since students may lack systematic strategies necessary for finding a focus and beginning (Brostoff and Beyer 1980: 39-40), they need to be taught how to explore topics, develop ideas, and discover relationships by making use of the kinds of invention techniques described by Koch and Brazil (1978: 25-63), Lauer (1980: 57-59), Maimon et al. (1981: 23-45), Wiener (1980: 90-92), and Young (1978: 35-39). While the ESL field is beginning to recognize the importance of these activities (see, for example Daubney-Davis 1981, McKay 1981, and Taylor 1981), is still seems dominated by a concern with product, thus supporting the finding that school-sponsored writing provides little time for prewriting (Emig 1971: 92).

Another important aspect of the composing process concerns the way writers feel about the topics they are asked to write about. Raimes is critical of the narrow range of topics ESL students are typically assigned (1979: 17-19), and Taylor claims that "Rarely is a writing assignment compelling enough to give students an opportunity to immerse themselves totally in the topic to the extent that they have something important to say" (1981: 9). Writing instruction that focuses on rhetorical forms and requires students to compose papers on artificial topics in order to demonstrate mastery of these forms fails to recognize that writers write both quantitatively more and qualitatively better when they are composing papers about topics that engage them (Perl 1980a: 30-31). Students' writing thus should be motivated by their feelings about and responses to a topic with which they have had some experience (Judy 1980: 39, Lauer 1980: 56). This does not mean, however, that writing assignments need be entirely student generated or that they involve only personal accounts, but rather that even academic writing should allow students to become involved in a subject (Weiss 1980: 146) or provide them with a way into the topic (Perl 1980a: 31).

As far as writing about truly personal topics is concerned, it should be kept in mind that the ESL students that were interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with more personally-oriented assigned writing, a finding that has been reported before (Kroll 1979). Perhaps this dissatisfaction stems from the fact they are in the habit of using their own native language when writing about more private matters and therefore feel that the academic setting is inappropriate for this type of discourse. Or, perhaps because these assignments were collected, evaluated for error, and graded, these students were never given to understand the purpose of this type of writing, that it was meant to get them in touch with and value their felt thoughts and responses. Once students and their teachers recognize the function of expressive or reflective writing (Britton 1978: 16, Emig 1971:
91), they may begin to appreciate its importance. By keeping personal journals, for example, students may come to realize that writing is indeed a way to explore one’s feelings and thoughts.

While students are rarely provided with prewriting practice and may have little idea as to the reasons why they are asked to write particular types of discourse, it is the actual process of composing of which they may have the least understanding and with which they are probably given the least experience. Not knowing how writers behave and what the process involves, students “tend to think that the point of writing is to get everything right the first time and that the need to change things is the work of the amateur” (Shaughnessy 1977: 79). They may have the misconception that, because of our attention to form, “writers know the form before they know the content” (Murray 1980: 13). They may have the impression that writers “know exactly what they are going to say before they say it” (Murray 1978: 100). But we know from the research findings that this is not the case, and this knowledge needs to be imparted to our students. We must allow them to experience the process of discovering what they want to say through writing. We must provide them with ample time to write and rewrite, to learn that several drafts may be needed before intention and expression become one. We need to show them our own attempts to write and the different transformations that this writing undergoes, for “one of the most important facts about the composing process that seems to get hidden from students is that the process that creates precision is itself messy” (Shaughnessy 1977: 222). In this way they may come to appreciate that revising may mean deleting and adding paragraphs or even pages, not the editing or proofreading that revising has traditionally been synonymous with. They also need to be taught that since writers do not produce perfect essays in one sitting certain features of composing are focused upon before others. This helps reinforce the idea that content and organization are of primary importance and that editing, though to some extent inevitable throughout, is really the province of the last stage of composing. Furthermore this may keep students from experiencing a cognitive overload, a situation which results when too many factors, concerns, or problems are being attended to simultaneously (Maimon et al. 1981: 10, Hirsch 1980: 159).

Rather than require students to prepare comprehensive outlines (Britton 1978, Halsted 1975, Taylor 1981), we should encourage them to take more informal notes or jot down ideas and reassure them that they need not know from the outset what it is they are going to say. Otherwise, rather than struggling to make sense of their ideas, they may be struggling because “we have put writing in a framework that inhibits communication and/or expression” (Petty 1978: 83). We may also need to reexamine our use of the prose models which we ask our students to imitate, a practice that seems to be pervasive in ESL, perhaps because of Kaplan’s (1967)
study of culture-specific rhetorical thought patterns. But this methodology can be misleading because it may give students the impression that the linear, straightforward writing they are supposed to imitate is the result of a process that was itself linear. It fails to show students that the thinking and writing that preceded these models may have been chaotic and disorganized and that their own attempts to write may involve this same disorder. The study of such models puts undue emphasis on the final and correct product and by doing so threatens students with the idea that they are expected to achieve the same level of competency and may render them incapable of even beginning (Eschholz 1980: 23). Instead of asking students to match their writing to a particular model, we need to teach them that "form grows from content and is inseparable from it" (Judy 1980: 41), that structuring and organizing one's ideas and thoughts only make sense with reference to the nature of those ideas and thoughts. Finally, because ESL students may still be in the process of acquiring language skills, it needs to be emphasized that grammar-based approaches to teaching writing serve neither as substitutes nor prerequisites for instruction in the process of composing (Lauer 1980: 54). Extensive research has shown that grammar study may have little to do with composing (Zamel 1976: 72-74), and it has been pointed out that even low-level students should be given the opportunity to explore this process (Taylor 1976: 310-311, Raimes 1979: 3).

Writing taught as a process of discovery implies that revision becomes the main focus of the course and that the teacher, who traditionally provides feedback after the fact, intervenes to guide students through the process. Teacher-student conferences need to be regularly held between drafts so that students learn, while they are creating, what areas need to be worked on. Some educators feel that individual conferences are so effective that they should take the place of all in-class instruction (Carnicelli 1980). This, however, would deny the students the opportunity to share their writing with other students, an activity that forms the basis of much process-centered instruction (see, for example, Dowst 1980, Judy 1980, Lauer 1980, Maimon 1980, Murray 1980, Wiener 1980). This shared experience reinforces the fact that the teacher is truly not the only reader, a claim which we repeatedly make but fail to convince our students of, and that audience considerations therefore need to be taken into account. Moreover, this type of experience helps develop in students the crucial ability of re-viewing their writing with the eyes of another. Most beginning students who are unable to adopt another's frame of reference, compose essays that are egocentric (Brostoff and Beyer 1980: 44, Odell et al. 1978: 5). They may not be aware that their prose is writer-based rather than reader-based (Flower 1979) and that as we write "our needs as readers become paramount" (Emig 1978: 66). Peers who serve as a real and immediate audience can help establish these needs.
It should not be concluded from the foregoing discussion that engaging students in the process of composing eliminates our obligation to upgrade their linguistic competencies. Raimes (1979) talks about the numerous language skills that ESL composition teachers need to attend to. But what needs to be emphasized is that this obligation should not form the basis of our writing instruction. Syntax, vocabulary, and rhetorical form are important features of writing, but they need to be taught not as ends in and of themselves, but as the means with which to better express one's meaning. Otherwise, students may never understand why these features are important:

Cut off from the impulse to say something, or from the sense that anything he might say is important to anyone else, he is automatically cut off from the grammatical intuitions that would serve him in a truly communicative situation. (Shaughnessy 1977: 86)

If, however, students learn that writing is a process through which they can explore and discover their thoughts and ideas, then product is likely to improve as well.

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