Student Numbers in the Second-Language Writing Classroom

Harry W. Harris, Jr.
(Faculty of Education, Hakuoh University)

The Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication approved a statement in 2000, endorsed by the TESOL Board of Directors in 2001, affirming that, because of additional feedback and conference demands, there is a need to reduce student enrollment in writing classes with second-language (SL) learners and to limit writing classes to a maximum of 15 when all learners are SL students. This paper briefly explores a history of SL theory and pedagogy and offers commentary in support of that affirmation.

"Since working with second-language writers often requires additional feedback and conference time with the instructor, enrollments in mainstream writing classes with a substantial number of second-language writers should be reduced; in classes made up exclusively of second-language writers, enrollments should be limited to a maximum of 15 students per class." (CCCC Executive Committee, 2006, p.12)

I . Introduction

To most second language (SL) teachers and those who have been following developments in the field, the issuance of the above statement originally approved by the Executive Committee of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in 2000 and endorsed by the TESOL Board of Directors in 2001 (ibid., p.13) should come as little surprise. A professional organization since 1949, the CCCC concerns itself
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with “support[ing] a wide range of research on composition, communication, and rhetoric; … work[ing] to enhance the conditions for learning and teaching college composition and to promote professional development; … and act[ing] as an advocate for language and literacy education nationally and internationally” (CCCC, n.d.). For this mission, this organization has, with manifest vigor, encouraged professional participation in the field by providing scholarships and awards to academics as well as forums for discussion of relevant issues in its journals and at its conventions. Resolute CCCC and, as we shall see, TESOL interest in effective SL writing pedagogy is evident.

TESOL, which detached itself from the CCCC in 1966 in order to form an independent professional organization which could focus on issues specific to L2 English learners, has exhibited the same professional vitality, gathering a community of teachers and researchers who have dedicated themselves to exploring the theoretical issues that arise in ESL/EFL and working towards the expression of their research results in the L2 classroom. TESOL has also taken a pro-active stance towards L2-related issues and continued professionalism in the field, as evidenced by its large number of position statements, including its June 2003 affirmation that “qualified ESL and EFL educators should be aware of current trends and research and their instructional implications in the fields of linguistics, second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, language pedagogy and methodology, literacy development, assessment, and cross-cultural communication” (TESOL Board of Directors, 2003) and its later one that “research findings can serve as the basis for sound educational policies” (TESOL Board of Directors, 2005).

Now, few serious professionals would deny that the purpose of academic organizations is to promote the exchange of ideas among participants, to
disseminate relevant research through conferences and journals, and, when applicable and viable, to use that research as a basis to improve the quality of life in society through services, including education. These professional organizations are community leaders which provide research-based guidelines such as the SL writing class formula that the CCCC and TESOL have affirmed. Though evolving and debatable, guidelines of this type are expected and often appreciated by the academic community (and by others to whom these issues are significant), which in turn can play its part in the determination of their appropriateness for local conditions and the need for their implementation in the classroom or elsewhere, unless and until the empirical evidence and theories on which they are based are repudiated or refuted.

However, apart from the role of academic leadership that has motivated the CCCC to formulate and TESOL to endorse the statement which we have read above, there is a more experiential reason why this announcement does not surprise concerned professionals. They know that the SL writing curricula that have evolved along with the theoretical developments in the field require carefully crafted and constant guidance to meet the needs of SL students in the form of course preparation and written and oral response to student work because “most second-language writers are still in the process of acquiring syntactic and lexical competence—a process that will take a lifetime… [and which is] often more intense” (CCCC Executive Committee, 2006, p.11). They also know that large SL writing classes make it difficult for teachers to supply effective written and oral response, which can make it less likely that students will grow with their academic experiences.

The purpose of this paper, then, is to explore the impetus that lies behind the affirmation that there is a need to limit enrollments in the SL writing classroom because of feedback and conference demands. In no way does
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the paper mean to reprehend any specific academic institution for not doing so. This writer has been fortunate to have taught at academic institutions where administrative officials have responded favorably to requests for enrollment limits. Rather, this paper should be understood as an objective attempt to explain the position that the CCCC and TESOL have taken that has led them to make their statement. To do so, we will first take a brief look at the historical development of SL writing theory, after which we will examine the nature of SL writing feedback and conferencing, and then sum up with comments on the detrimental effect that large classes can have on SL instruction in view of current SL writing theory and pedagogy.

II. SL Writing Theory

To reach an understanding of current SL writing theory, it is probably fruitful to go back, as Matsuda argues (2001, 2006), to the 19th century, when the focus of second-language studies was spoken language. Writing was then “neglected” as a field for serious study in applied linguistics; there was a “strong emphasis on the primacy of spoken language”; and when writing was taught, there was an emphasis on “free composition” as opposed to the translation exercises that had traditionally been done (Matsuda, 2006, p.15). This focus on spoken language maintained its dominance when, to meet the needs of the greater numbers of international students in U.S. universities in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, ESL pedagogy morphed into the behaviorist audio-lingual method, which “emphasized instruction of sound structures” and “marginalized” writing (Fujieda, 2006, p.61). Students who studied writing entered special sections of freshman English composition courses,
often considered remedial (Matsuda, 2006, p.17), where the theory-based pedagogical focus was on a final written product, not on the cognitive/sociological processes that students had to go through to produce it.

The 1960s saw the growth of an awareness of the need to provide more tailored SL writing instruction, but this resulted in a writing pedagogy that "dealt with a heavy focus on surface-error improvement, text manipulation in the form of drills, product analysis [of model texts], rejecting free composition and, initially, any idea of meaningful learner autonomy" (Harris, 2007, p.99). During this period, SL writing focused first on such textual features as orthography and sentence-level structure and, later, on rhetorical form, after Kaplan's 1966 contrastive rhetoric article in which he proposed that one's L1 background can have an effect on one's L2 rhetorical style. As has been suggested above, this led to exercises that stressed "paragraph completion, identification of topic and support, and scrambled paragraphs to reorder" (Raimes, 1991, p.409). In SL writing research the product and its manipulation and imitation held preeminence, and, to this writer's knowledge, there was no sustained interest in writing-as-a-process pedagogy, though, as Matsuda points out, there was process-like thinking in SL writing as reflected in Erazmus' (1960) discussion of "rapid writing" (which was to liberate students from attending to grammar errors and stylistics), Brière's (1966) emphasis on "quantity over quality in L2 writing instruction," and Arapoff's (1967) argument that writing is an experience (Matusda, 2003, p. 76). It is, however, indicative of the persistent hold of behaviorist pedagogy on contemporary SL writing scholars that Arapoff offered, in a touchstone-like tone, that "[b]y using sentences gleaned from reading they [SL writing

(1) In the present millennium, in a U.S. university, this writer has taught English composition classes with mixed L1 and L2 students. Undoubtedly, there are other higher institutions where this is still done, despite the different needs of the students.
students] can avoid making grammatical errors" (ibid., p.35) and that Rojas wrote that “[s]o long as they [L2 students] are unable to write without making the kind of mistakes that native speakers of English would never make, they need to be given abundant drill-type practice exercises" (1968, p. 127).

With the shift from a behavioral to a cognitive approach in education, the 1970s and 1980s saw a similar shift in the SL writing literature from a focus on the product, with which the student writer attempted to approximate a more perfect standard and by which the success of L2 language development might be determined, to one on the process, through which the writer created meaning. The SL research stage for this shift was set, perhaps, by Vivian Zamel’s 1976 paper in which she argued that SL writing students, just like L1 students, can benefit from process writing pedagogy, emphasizing “writing as a process of developing organization as well as meaning” and inviting “invention strategies [such as brainstorming], multiple drafts, and formative feedback” (Matsuda, 2006, p.20) in SL writing instruction. In effect, this pedagogical shift focused on the cognitive processes and self-growth through which SL students should go as they learned to write in English and, consequently, expanded, or changed, the nature of SL learner responsibilities as they engaged themselves in the heuristic activities and steps that would help them succeed in this endeavor. It also, as we are seeing, increased, or changed, the nature of teacher responsibilities as these professionals were called upon to ally themselves with the process, providing guidance to learners as they worked through the activities and steps that had been designed to improve their English writing skills.

Though it has been cogently explained by some scholars in the latter half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st that there have been other shifts towards content and reader, focusing on academic expectations
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(Raimes, op. cit.), or towards a “postmethod condition,” encouraging us not to regard classrooms and students “through the spectacles of approaches and techniques” (Canagarajah, 2006, p.20), at this point, what should matter to us, for the purposes of our argument, are the pedagogical methods that have filtered out of the theoretical discussions. These now acknowledge the primacy of the individual SL writer who engages in a cognitive/sociological process, with unique writing issues stemming from distinct linguistic, cultural, and preparatory backgrounds. They also acknowledge, as the CCCC and TESOL have recognized, a considerable reliance on feedback and conferencing to help give guidance to SL learners with those backgrounds. Let’s take a look at these two mainstays of SL writing programs in order to understand better the challenges SL writing students may face in the learning process and to appreciate further the need for the proposed class limits, without which these students’ achievements can be reduced.

III. Feedback and Conferencing

As we have seen, writing pedagogy went through a shift in the 1970s, resulting in an emphasis on multiple drafts with the idea that the process of learning to write was a gradual one which required guidance through teacher feedback, which of course can be written and, as we shall discuss later, oral. Though this denial of the total importance of the final product has attenuated to some degree, as with the admonition that writers must meet the demands of the audience (e.g. Raimes, op. cit., pp.410-412), multi-drafts are core to all SL writing programs that have been seriously influenced by developments in SL writing pedagogy. Students are essentially asked to write at least two, but more often, three, four, or more drafts of an assignment and the teacher provides written feedback. In some cases, that feedback derives
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solely from the teacher who may address content and structure issues in the first draft, "linguistic and mechanical" issues in the second, with a final assessment and grade for the third (e.g. Silva, 2002, p.79). In other cases, as with this writer, students may be asked to do in-class peer evaluations/corrections of other students' first drafts, the goal being to encourage students to expand their conception of audience and to introduce them to the idea that the teacher does not always have to be the source of feedback. Global, mechanical, and structural, and content issues are addressed in subsequent drafts by the teacher.

Written feedback is time-consuming and can cause frustration, which can grow with student numbers, leading to student and teacher burnout. In writing courses in which students are asked to do, for example, four, five, or even six assignments in a typical 12-14 week semester, students are kept constantly busy doing rewrites after receiving feedback from their teachers (or peers). As assignment overlaps are quite possible, with students concurrently submitting later drafts of previous assignments and earlier drafts of later ones, teachers can find themselves inundated by a seemingly unbroken flow of drafts to which they must attend by deadlines that they have set. Not doing this in a timely manner can disrupt the student learning process which the teacher may have tried to govern through a syllabus and the program through objectives. It can also very easily result in a bottleneck accompanied by a buildup of student drafts on which feedback must be provided later in order to meet the needs and demands of the students and course.

In programs in which writing students are required to make periodic journal entries and exchanges, as in this writer's program, and in which the teacher intervenes to engage the students in dialogue, there are additional demands. Journals in general seem to “help students develop organizational
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... and analytical skills and become clearer, more convincing writers" (Hirayanagi, 1998, p.6). They are used in many SL writing programs to help develop fluency rather than accuracy and as such often are not corrected or revised since, as Casanave (2004) points outs, "students are testing their own interlanguage hypotheses about their evolving L2" (p.72). Thus, with dialogue journals, in which teachers interact with their students, teachers provide written prompts and responses in student journals on a regular basis, which requires time and careful wording. In this writer's use of online dialogue journals with students at a Japanese university, student journals are accessed weekly and responses are given to student entries that can range from their family matters, to their intimate experiences with members of the opposite sex, and to their declarations that suicide is not an option. Each response, or decision not to respond, must be considered carefully in view of the consequences that it might induce. In short, though other researchers have reported on success with dialogue and other types of journals (e.g. Casanave, ibid., p.73; Duppenthaler, 2004a, 2004b), these written activities require well-balanced and individualized attention when responses to student entries are made.

Now, to pause a moment, it is important to understand that written feedback can be non-corrective (or phatic) or it can be corrective. Both non-corrective and corrective written feedback can be used in composition assignments, though, as stated above, many teachers might only make non-corrective remarks in dialogue journals. The former type of feedback is characterized by teacher comments which are ideally meant to encourage students, such as Good job!, whereas the latter type can be broken down into direct and indirect corrective feedback. With direct corrective feedback, the teacher provides, for example, a correct spelling or morphosyntactic structure or appropriate lexeme in written form on a student draft, which
the student transcribes onto a subsequent one. With indirect corrective feedback, the teacher can use a set of symbols, such as numbers, to indicate the type or error or merely underline or circle the error on the student draft to call the error to the student’s attention. The student is to use this information, reflecting on which changes need to be made in the assignment.

Few teachers would deny the need for non-corrective written feedback. We need to encourage students and let them know that we are paying attention to their efforts, and they seem to appreciate this. Moreover, though the issue of corrective feedback has given cause for polemics in the SL academic community with some researchers suggesting that direct feedback may not engage students cognitively (e.g. Lalande, 1982) and others maintaining that there is little evidence that grammar [corrective] feedback results in long term improvement (Truscott: 1996, 1999), other scholars disagree (e.g. Robb, Ross, and Shortread, 1986; Ferris, 2006). These dissenting academics insist that teachers may indeed need to give direct corrective feedback especially “when students are at beginning levels of English language proficiency,” (Ferris, 2002, pp.63-64) and that corrective feedback itself is necessary to help students avoid linguistic fossilizations or overestimation of their knowledge (Higgs and Clifford, 1982; Scarcella, 1996: cited in Ferris, ibid., p.64). Without a doubt, many SL writing teachers continue to spend long hours engaged in student assignment correction because they feel it is their professional obligation to help students improve the skills that are involved. As we have suggested before, though this task can be time-consuming and frustrating, it must be done methodically to help students, to prevent backup, and to meet course syllabi and program objectives. Unequivocally, in large non-lecture-type classes of this kind, these pedagogical and administrative goals are more difficult to achieve.

At any rate, until we have further research providing us with definitive
answers to the above issues, at this point in time perhaps it is probably safe to say that we should remember that most students apparently appreciate corrective feedback and that, because students learn in a variety of ways at different and sometimes unpredictable times, it is our responsibility to help them “notice” their language issues in written form and oral form. Also, in this world where they may increasingly be held accountable for their work and for their social participation, or lack of either or both, we should encourage our writing students to be responsible for editing their assignments, which we may do through written feedback but which we can probably do better through conferences.

Though it has been pointed out that conference feedback is not always successful (Goldstein and Conrad, 1990: cited in Goldstein, 2006, p.186), there is counter research that indicates that conference feedback from teachers can have a positive effect (Patthey-Chavez and Ferris, 1997: cited in Goldstein, ibid.) and a belief among some researchers that, through conferences, teachers have the opportunity to respond to the “cultural, educational, and writing needs of their students, clarifying meaning and resolving ambiguity” (Hyland & Hyland, 2006, p.5). Whatever the research, it is difficult to imagine experienced SL writing teachers not having reached the conclusion that oral feedback is important for their students. Students may not be able to read a teacher’s written feedback, especially if it is in cursive (2); students may not understand the feedback, especially if it is lengthy; students may not have the resources to act on that feedback, especially if it requires linguistic, social, or conceptual skills that they have not yet acquired; students may not want to act on that feedback, especially

(2) This can be a real issue especially in ESL/EFL situations, where students may not have studied cursive writing in their local school systems or where they may even be uncomfortable with the alphabet. We must also remember that, by nature, cursive handwriting is not standard and that it reflects the writer’s idiosyncrasies.
if its message is contrary to something that they have learned elsewhere; and, finally, students may be overloaded due to the demands of the course and the novel academic experiences in which they are engaged and may, therefore, just not respond to earlier advice. Somehow, in some venue, there must be some oral interaction between the student and teacher, whether briefly in a hallway or, preferably, more lengthily in an office, classroom, language lab, or elsewhere.

Conferences can be conducted inside the classroom or outside of it, for example in the teacher’s office. When returning drafts of assignments, this writer conducts mini-conferences with individual students in the classroom while other students are working on other activities. Essentially, during the 90-minute class session, individual students are returned their corrected papers and, with these in front of them, led into talks that can deal with issues of ideas and meaning, vocabulary choice, grammar, mechanics, paragraph format and content, etc. This is done with every draft of an assignment (except for the first one, which is read in class by peers), in 2-to 5-or-more-minute mini-sessions, though later drafts tend to require less time because many students have made improvements. Invariably, especially with larger classes, it is not possible to attend to all students during the class session and so time is spent after class in the then-empty classroom, in a hallway, or back in my office, which, consonant with the fairly liberal open-door policy that faculty members have at my institution, they are invited to visit whenever they have questions. Inevitably, many do and can spend from nine to ninety minutes asking questions and discussing issues about their assignments. Many also need further in-class/out-of-class clarification of explanations that they have not understood. In my experience, the time is well-spent as evidenced by the improvements that students make in their papers and by their increasing willingness to interact with the teacher to
improve their work, but it is made more challenging with larger numbers of students.

IV. Concluding Remarks

We have seen that in 2000 the CCCC approved a statement by which it declared its position regarding the need to limit the number of students in writing classrooms which are partially or totally composed of SL learners because of the necessity to provide them with more feedback and conference time and that it has acknowledged that “the process of acquiring syntactic and lexical competence... [is] often more intense” (CCCC Executive Committee, op. cit.) for SL learners. We have also seen that in 2001 the TESOL Board of Directors endorsed this statement in agreement with that position and in acknowledgement of the difficulties that SL students face in their endeavors to learn to write in another language. The advice of these organizations should be seriously considered for implementation because, if it is not, we may not be offering SL writing students the proper conditions to flourish in the learning process.

Most ESL/EFL teachers and other perspicacious professionals understand that SL education in general involves careful attention to student needs and response choices that can go beyond that required in first-language education because socio-cultural differences can mean that the cues that signal feelings and thinking can be misread, inviting consequences not necessarily in tandem with course goals. It is also well understood that SL writing education in particular involves written and oral feedback and conferences in order to attend to that “often more intense” language-learning process that SL students experience in the different stages of their assignments. To ignore these needs can ultimately be, as we are arguing in
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this paper, detrimental to the learning process.

Large SL writing classes, therefore, do not conform to current theoretical and pedagogical findings or with the advice stemming from these findings and, consequently, can be considered problematic and unfair to students. SL writing learners need constant well-considered direction in written and oral form. They need written feedback on their assignments which must always encourage them to continue their studies and which must provide them with the ideas and possible corrections that they need to progress. They need oral feedback in and out of the classroom to provide them with the double opportunity to grasp and build upon the advice they may have received in other forms and forums. The very nature of this feedback, of this attention that must be given to students and their needs, means that in large SL writing classes teacher efforts can only be diluted, reducing their effect and resulting in less learning and the concomitant attenuated capabilities that these learners will have with which to make future contributions to their communities.

Silva has concluded that “[i]n general, L2 writer’s texts [are] less fluent (fewer words), less accurate (more errors), and less effective (lower holistic scores)” (1993, p.668) and has asked us to recall that “L2 writing is strategically, rhetorically, and linguistically different in important ways from L1 writing” (ibid., p.669). Surely, that is why the CCCC and TESOL have enjoined us through their position statement to limit the number of students in SL writing classes.

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