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Learning to Write Analytically in a Second Language: The School Writing Experiences of Six ESL Students

by
George E. Newell

As researchers become more interested in how schooling affects the development of writing abilities, we are beginning to understand some of the difficulties of learning to write in a school context. These difficulties are not so much with putting pen to paper as with writing under the constraints of a specific task, with specific information, for a specific teacher. Add to these the difficulties of learning to write in a second language, and the problem is compounded. While research and program development have begun (for example, see Cronnell, 1981), we still know very little about how students from different linguistic backgrounds learn to write in English. As we explore ways to enhance the writing skills of ESL students, our pedagogy must make the necessary shift from our traditional concern with syntax to an examination of how ESL students learn to construct longer pieces of writing such as analytic essays that require language skills that give shape to text as a whole.

Recent research on the composing processes of ESL students (Zamel, 1982; 1983) makes it clear that high school students in ESL programs face problems that are similar to those of students whose native language is English. This is especially true of students at the high school and college levels since, as all students advance to higher grade levels, they are expected to manage the same increasingly complex demands of the composing process. In the high school years, intermediate and advanced ESL students begin to undertake new and more complicated tasks in their writing, moving beyond the narrative forms and summaries that dominated their earlier writing experiences to new, complex strategies of analysis and argument (Applebee, 1981, 1984) entailed in academic writing.

ESL students need to learn strategies for managing the demands of school writing tasks such as analytic writing; this need became clear to me when I worked with a group of six ESL students attending a high school ESL program. Twice a month for a period of a year and a half, we met individually to discuss how I might help them with the writing they did in all content areas, including their ESL classrooms. As a part of these conferences, I recorded our conversations and collected copies of their writing to examine the processes and strategies they used to complete the writing and their perceptions of the writing instruction. As might be imagined, the topics of those discussions varied with the writing proficiency of the students, the courses they were attending, and the nature of the instruction they encountered. However, one issue that the ESL students constantly brought to our talks was their struggle with learning to