

5 Revision and ESL Students

Kasia Kietlinska

A few years ago, in one of my classes, when I returned students' papers and discussed revision as an option for students to improve their writing, an English as a Second Language (ESL) student stayed after class and asked me, "So you want me to write a new paper, because this one is wrong, right?" The question, while not necessarily reflective of how all of our students view revision, may indeed be symptomatic for how ESL students perceive it. And my student certainly found a sympathetic ear. I could still remember the times when I was an ESL student myself. The teacher's suggestion to "revise" simply meant a nicer way of saying my paper was bad and needed corrections.

Despite popularity of revision in classroom pedagogy, the concept still lacks a full theoretical elaboration. The picture gets even more complicated for ESL students, with their additional problems related to mechanisms of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and a broad variety of cultural assumptions they bring into the classroom. Therefore, it is not surprising that much of the available research on ESL students' revision focuses on whether ESL, or Second Language (L2), writing is similar to or different from that of Native English Speaking (NES) students. In our approaches to revision in the ESL classrooms, and particularly in the actual practical applications, it is indeed necessary to understand to what extent L2 students' needs are like those of our NES students. Understanding this would allow us to transfer composition theory findings and applicable First Language (L1) classroom techniques to ESL classrooms. It would also help us modify these techniques to respond to needs that are essentially different from those of NES writers.

HISTORY OF THE DISCIPLINE

Originally, when the study of L2 writing began as an area of second language studies, it did not receive much attention since the focus was on spoken language, with writing seen mostly as an orthographic representation of speech. The assumption of English Language Institute (ELI), the first ESL program in the country established in 1941 at the University of Michigan, was that once students mastered the language, they would write. As a result of behaviorist influences, ESL writing was strictly controlled to discourage fossilization of students' interlanguage, or in other words, to prevent student errors, natural for intermediate stages of foreign language acquisition, from solidifying into a habit. Revision, therefore, focused entirely on sentence-level errors. The serious study of L2 writing did not really begin until the 1960s. After the creation of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) in 1966, the discipline remained more closely affiliated with second language studies than with composition studies (Matsuda 15–19). Consequently, there was very little research on L2 writing as independent from TESOL until the 1980's (Krapels 37).

In the late 1970s and 1980s, this strong emphasis on L2 studies gave way to writing process research. Paul Kei Matsuda points to Vivian Zamel's seminal work (1976 and 1982), which started a trend of emphasizing similarities between L1 and L2 writing and, practically speaking, treated writing needs of ESL and NES students as identical (21). In this new trend, competence in the composing process and literacy skills in L1 were perceived as much more important for acquiring writing skills in English than the actual L2 language competence (Krapels 40).

However, even some traditional process-approach scholars, such as Illona Leki and Ann Raimes, who focused on similarities between L1 and L2 learners, also admitted the existence of differences. While insisting that practicing writing was more important than acquiring English language skills (*Understanding* 78), Leki also acknowledged that, "With the distinctive burden of learning to write and learning English at the same time, ESL students have needs which set them apart from mainstream English-speaking students" (*Understanding* 27). Similarly, Raimes, who generally tends to view ESL and basic L1 writers as very similar, still noted: "We need to know what character-

izes them [ESL students] as writers grappling not only with a written code but with a linguistic code that is still being acquired” (40).

Therefore, it is not surprising the pendulum is shifting from the process approach. Newer research focuses on differences rather than similarities between L1 and L2 writing again, but this time with a much more pragmatic approach, acknowledging applicability of the process approach whenever it might help students. Matsuda clearly sees the future of the discipline in overcoming the still relatively rigid barrier between TESOL and composition studies (18). He postulates an interdisciplinary approach, which would integrate L2 writing into composition studies (25).

The history of the discipline seems instructive as it reveals the futility of one-sided ideological approaches. The newer ESL writing research departs from the process orthodoxy and very convincingly argues for unique needs of ESL students. In his 1993 article, Tony Silva discusses the ESL revision patterns as distinct from those of NES students:

It is clear that L2 composing is more constrained, more difficult, and less effective. L2 writers did less planning (global and local) and had more difficulty with setting goals and generating and organizing material. Their transcribing was more laborious, less fluent, and less productive—perhaps reflective of a lack of lexical resources. They reviewed, reread, and reflected on their written texts less, revised more—but with more difficulty and were less able to revise intuitively. (200)

These differences have led Silva to suggest that L2 writing theorists and teachers need to “look beyond L1 writing theories, to better describe the unique nature of L2 writing” (201).

DIVERSITY OF THE ESL STUDENT POPULATION

The uniqueness of the ESL population is additionally heightened by an incredible diversity of ESL students, who all share the non-native status in the English language but vary in almost everything else. Leki discusses differences among the ESL population in age, education level, writing and literacy skills in L1, proficiency levels in L2, attitudes about the U.S., not to mention cultural differences resulting in highly diverse attitudes toward language, writing, teaching and teachers, classroom instruction methods, classroom communication styles, etc. (*Understanding* 39).

The most traditional distinction that may strongly affect classroom pedagogy, and more specifically the teaching of revision, is that between the international ESL students and the immigrant ESL students. While the former tend to have high L1 literacy and writing skills, their L2 proficiency is much higher in reading and writing than in speech and oral comprehension. Also, it is worth remembering that in order to qualify for study in the U.S., these students are required to successfully pass the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) exam in their home countries, which guarantees a high degree of familiarity with English grammatical and syntactic structures. On the other hand, the immigrant ESL students, mostly graduates of American high schools, usually speak fluent English, with little or no foreign accent, but show problems in literacy skills, often in both L1 and L2 (Leki, *Understanding* 43). Typically, they also have very weak metalanguage skills (Ferris, "One Size" 145).

I can vividly remember a Polish student I had in an ESL individual tutorial section, mostly because his was a rare case where I had access to his literacy and metalanguage skills in both languages. Having come to the US at the end of middle school, the student was quickly mainstreamed and never received any extensive ESL training, so his English was very limited, particularly in writing. When I tried to use Polish to explain certain more complex ideas, and particularly raise issues of language rules and usage, I soon discovered that his L1 literacy development stagnated at the middle school level when he stopped having access to more sophisticated, school-oriented discourse in Polish. His case convincingly illustrates the problems of many immigrant ESL students for whom the language transfer has come at an inopportune time, so that their literacy in L1 has been stunted while it has not developed in L2.

Newer research, with its focus on unique needs of L2 students, takes a more nuanced approach to defining separate categories of ESL learners. Ann Johns divides L2 students into three rather than two groups. She discusses both international students, the smallest group but academically most proficient and most competent in metalanguage as a result of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) study in their home countries, and immigrant students, whom she calls Limited English Proficient (LEP) learners, who have no academic language proficiency and are often required to take ESL classes in addition to other college courses. However, she also distinguishes a separate category of Emer-

gent English-Dominant Learners, mostly children of immigrants, at least to some extent educated in the U.S. schools. Members of this group tend to have oral and cultural competencies close to those of native speakers but lack expertise in academic writing in both languages. This particular category of ESL students has recently become a center of more research. This “Generation 1.5,” as they have been labeled, following the title of the 1999 essay collection, *Generation 1.5 Meets College Composition: Issues in the Teaching of Writing to U.S. Educated ESL Learners*, edited by Linda Harklau, Kay M. Losey, and Meryl Siegal, has been recognized as posing the most serious challenge for teachers. These students often show fossilization of interlanguage forms but lack metalinguistic skills necessary to address the issue and are not usually recognized as having any ESL problems (Johns 142–44). Consequently, it is not surprising that teaching methods that could be successful for international students would not necessarily work for LEP students or for “Generation 1.5” learners.

All of these differences between L1 and L2 students, as well as those within the L2 population itself, are going to have a strong impact on how these groups will approach revision. Before we proceed any further, however, it is worth realizing that the existing research on revision patterns of ESL students is rather limited and tends to focus on various forms of feedback, as a necessary step in revision, more than on revision itself. This is, of course, understandable when we take into account the strongly grounded writing-as-a-process template of drafting, feedback, by both teachers and peers, and finally revising. While the template is actually helpful in understanding and teaching revision, let us for a moment look at what is currently known about ESL students’ revision attitudes, patterns and effectiveness.

REVISION ATTITUDES OF ESL STUDENTS

Contrary to what most American academics, teachers, and students may believe, the concept of writing as learning, where the formation of ideas occurs simultaneously with writing, and where multiple drafts, followed by continual revisions, are perceived as a natural production process, is far from universal. Therefore, ESL students, and particularly international students, are not accustomed to the concept of multiple drafts (Leki, *Understanding* 71), and they may naturally view revision in solely punitive terms as a means to correct surface mistakes,

without even trying to develop and refine content. Also, ESL students do not fully understand the U.S. academic audiences and writing conventions, so it is harder for them to revise in a way that would conform to these expectations. Students who are still in the process of gaining proficiency in English use native language conventions, and this transfer is not necessarily individual and random but “involves recurring patterns of organization and rhetorical conventions reminiscent of writing in the students’ native language and culture” (Connor 5). In many cultures, for example, it is not acceptable to discuss personal issues in the academic setting and to use personal experiences as evidence in the academic discourse (Leki, *Understanding* 67–68). Also, in more authoritarian cultures, it is a sign of respect for sources to cite extensive passages and paraphrase very closely to the original while the same strategy here carries the stigma of plagiarism (Leki, *Understanding* 71–72).

Besides, both international and immigrant students may have to grapple with individual resistance developed toward American culture. International students, whose stay in the U.S. is usually temporary, do not want to abandon their successful L1 writing patterns whereas immigrant students often suffer from confusion about their identity, torn between their home cultures and demands from the U.S. academic culture (Leki *Understanding* 42). When I started graduate school in the US, after working as an assistant English professor in Poland, I was not completely ready to assimilate into the landscape of the American academic culture. My main difficulty was to accept my professors’ comments when they suggested departures from Polish academic writing conventions. It took me a while to abandon a very formal, digressive discourse, heavily overloaded with specialized terminology, and gradually move to include personal pronouns, simpler language, and more straightforward thought development. Many of my immigrant students, on the other hand, react with dismay when told that in order to appeal to American academic audiences, they need more sophisticated formulations and more nuanced, morally neutral approaches, often very different from their home language norms.

REVISION PATTERNS OF ESL STUDENTS

These complex and often ambivalent attitudes certainly affect revision patterns of ESL students. While in general L2 writers tend to revise more than their L1 counterparts, it is definitely harder for them (Silva

195). The reason for this difficulty in revision may be attributed to the fact that all international students as well as a significant number of immigrant students may be unable to revise “by ear,” which is a typical revision strategy for L1 students (Silva 195).

Moreover, like L1 basic writers, ESL students tend to correct mostly surface-level errors, since they understand revising as mere editing and hardly ever substantially rework ideas (Raimes 38; Roca de Larios 23), but ESL students focus more on grammar and less on mechanics and spelling (Silva 195). What is a little surprising, however, is that ESL students do not follow the linear pattern of drafting first and revising later, typical for L1 basic writers, but revise “recursively” i.e. “create text—read—create text—read—edit—read—create text—read—read” (Raimes 53), a pattern typical for more skilled L1 writers (Randsell and Barbier 7). It is perhaps caused by the fact that they just cannot freely articulate their thoughts in a foreign language, so they construct writing as they go, constantly assembling and disassembling language structures, following grammatical, syntactic, and lexical rules of English they had studied but not necessarily mastered. So, ironically, what skilled L1 writers do as a sign of mastery of language, a sense of comfort and natural habit of revision, here could perhaps be caused by the opposite feelings of insecurity and self-consciousness.

REVISION EFFECTIVENESS OF ESL STUDENTS

When revision is such a struggle for ESL students, is it effective? Does revision improve the quality and accuracy of their writing? Unfortunately, research findings are not fully conclusive, and there is some degree of skepticism. On one hand, some studies indicate that revising does help ESL students to improve their writing abilities. Charlene Polio, Catherine Fleck and Nevin Leder, for example, found that whether or not the students received any editing feedback, they improved their writing accuracy in the revised essays (55); they improved their accuracy between the beginning and the end of the semester (53), but they did not improve revision skills over time (55). Consequently, Polio, Fleck and Leder contended “that learners can and do correct their own language without feedback” (61). While research by Polio, Fleck and Leder clearly focused on language accuracy rather than content, the study by Ann K. Fathman and Elizabeth Whalley found similar results on the impact of revision on content and demon-

strated that again, irrespective of feedback, the prevailing majority of students improved the quality of their content (183).

On the other hand, Dana Ferris, while also a committed believer in revision, sounds a little more skeptical. In her book *Treatment of Error in Second Language Student Writing*, she lists studies that confirm the effectiveness of revision as well as those that cast doubt upon the ESL students' ability to improve their writing as a result of revision. She contends that there is no compelling evidence that revision makes a difference in the long run but it seems to moderately improve the quality of the revised papers and increases the students' awareness of themselves as writers. She basically identifies the issue as an area for future research (26).

In spite of this rather inconclusive tone of research findings, many ESL writing experts agree that the key factor in increasing the effectiveness of revision in L2 student writing is time (Leki *Understanding* 82; New 81; Roca de Larios 23). In her frequently quoted passage, Raimes says, "ESL writers need more of everything: more time, more opportunity to talk, listen, read, and write in order to marshal the vocabulary they need to make their own background knowledge accessible to them in their L2" (55). Polio, Fleck and Leder agree: "Additional time does lead to self-correction" (62). Consequently, rather than giving up on revision as a strategy of improving ESL students' writing, we should structure our classroom practices to give students more time to revise. It is logical that students who still have to wear two hats, struggle with language and tackle writing skills, would need more time to process both.

My personal experience confirms that time is an important factor. Even though I was a relatively proficient ESL writer when I entered graduate school in the U.S., I was much slower than my American fellow students. Taking in-class written exams, I recall, meant more than just arranging ideas to offer meaningful interpretations; it also meant a struggle with language, a constant review of correct grammatical forms and appropriate vocabulary. It is quite natural, then, that when given more time, ESL students get a chance to incorporate revision into their habitual writing practices and thus to adjust to the conventions of the American academic community, where revision is a standard practice.

REVISION FEEDBACK BY TEACHERS

To learn how to revise their own work, however, students need more than just time. It has been an accepted part of the classroom pedagogy to facilitate feedback on drafts, either by peers or teachers, in order to assist students in their revision skills, and consequently help them improve their writing. This last contention, while commonly accepted by teachers, is far from obvious among researchers. A lot of theoreticians, particularly of the liberal process orientation, do not believe that teacher feedback is necessarily effective in improving student texts. Teacher comments are often criticized as inadequate, inconsistent, and often misinterpreted by student writers (Hyland 255). The most frequently cited study, conducted by Vivian Zamel in 1985, found that teachers often missed errors, corrected minor problems while ignoring serious global issues, and gave ambiguous comments. She generally concluded that teacher feedback was not helpful (Leki, "Coaching" 61). While such findings certainly indicate a need for caution in how teachers respond to their students' drafts, suggestions that teacher feedback should be abandoned altogether sound highly premature, particularly since research is not conclusive and often directly contradicts this skepticism (Leki, "Coaching" 65–66).

Fiona Hyland's study, for example, has suggested that student revisions have been positively influenced by teacher feedback (257 and 265). Also, numerous works by Dana Ferris exhibit a high degree of trust that teacher feedback is generally an indispensable part of the revision process. While admitting that "there is no 'one-size-fits-all' form of teacher commentary" (Ferris et al. 178), she notes that most revisions influenced by teacher feedback have led to improved writing ("Responding" 122). Teacher feedback, Ferris believes, "can have significant, positive effects on student revision" ("One Size" 148–49). According to her own collaborative study, 85 percent of errors were corrected in revision (*Treatment* 8). Even when she notes inconsistencies in student responses to feedback, she uses that as an argument for reform rather than abandonment of teacher feedback. Ferris admits, "The findings suggest two conflicting but coexisting truths: that students pay a great deal of attention to teacher feedback, which helps them make substantial, effective revisions, and that students sometimes ignore or avoid suggestions given in teacher commentary" ("One Size" 149). Ferris proceeds to offer numerous classroom strate-

gies teachers should use to improve the quality of their feedback. And improvement rather than abandonment of teacher feedback is indeed a more reasonable and more realistic strategy in ESL classrooms.

One of the reasons why abandoning the teacher feedback would be a highly problematic step is the prevailing favorable attitude of L2 students themselves. ESL students almost universally value teacher feedback (Ferris, "Responding" 122). Because L2 students perceive themselves as foreign language learners, they tend to be less intimidated and stigmatized by errors (Raimes 53; Leki, *Understanding* 81; Ferris, *Treatment* 32). Moreover, students strongly expect feedback and may react with disappointment if they don't get it (Raimes 53). We need to remember that many ESL students come from cultures which perceive teachers in highly authoritarian terms; therefore, teachers are expected to correct problems, and their refusal to do so may easily be interpreted as ignorance or laziness.

In my interview with Besma, the most successful ESL student I have ever taught, she strongly emphasized her need for thorough teacher feedback, harshly criticized former teachers who did not offer it, and related this preference to her Iraqi background. She did not seem to have a problem accepting criticism, and she wanted all her errors corrected and explained. "I do not want to make the same mistakes again," she said (Arabo). Her teacher from the tutorial support class confirmed this preference, speaking about the student's "heavy reliance on the teacher" and "an incredible ability to learn from the teacher's comments" (Wynn).

In this context, it seems rather ironic that radical process approach proponents, who generally argue for student empowerment, in this case easily dismiss students' own preferences. John Truscott, the most vocal critic of teacher feedback, and particularly of grammatical corrections, believes that students' demand for corrections does not mean "teachers have to give it to them" (qtd. in Ferris, *Treatment* 8). While not always necessarily decisive in themselves, students' attitudes certainly have to be taken into account in any pedagogy reforms, and dismissing them when it suits one's political agenda seems condescending, if not outright harmful to the students.

Recently, the debate has shifted from the question of whether teachers should give feedback on their students' papers to how such feedback should be construed to maximize its effectiveness. While the general consensus is that students benefit from comments about con-

tent, which encourage them to implement global revisions, there is far less agreement on whether grammatical feedback is equally effective. Once again, the main fault line of the debate seems to follow the general perception of ESL writers as either similar to or different from their NES counterparts. Because of the anti-grammar orthodoxy in the process theory, those who emphasize similarities between L2 and L1 writers tend to follow what Ferris calls “‘benign neglect’ of errors and grammar teaching” and discount the importance and validity of grammar feedback (*Treatment 4*). On the other hand, the researchers who focus on the distinct nature of ESL writing believe that correcting grammatical errors is necessary in order to prevent fossilization of the students’ interlanguage (Johns 153).

The most vocal of the process camp is Truscott, whose debate with Dana Ferris best exemplifies the two antagonistic positions. Truscott maintains that grammar correction is ineffective at best and at times even potentially harmful to L2 writers (Truscott 118; Hyland 256). Excessive attention to student error, argue such process advocates as Truscott, Zamel, and Krashen, “may short-circuit students’ writing and thinking process, making writing only an exercise in practical grammar and vocabulary rather than a way to discover and express meaning” (Ferris, *Treatment 49*).

On the other hand, while admitting that research on effectiveness of error correction and grammar instruction is incomplete and often inconclusive, Dana Ferris believes that teachers should not abdicate this, often very tedious duty (*Treatment 9*). L2 students need additional intervention, since they are still in the process of learning syntax, morphology and lexicon of English (Ferris, *Treatment 4*). To facilitate this learning process, Ferris goes beyond just feedback and proposes grammar minilessons. In radical disagreement with her process-advocating colleagues, Ferris says: “Well-constructed error feedback, especially when combined with judiciously delivered strategy training and grammar minilessons is beneficial and highly appreciated by ESL students” (*Treatment 49*). In her own collaborative study, published in 2000, Ferris found that 85 percent of marked errors were corrected in revision (*Treatment 8*). Similarly, Fathman and Whalley noticed the effectiveness of grammatical feedback. Irrespective of the kind of received feedback (form, content, or both), all students improved content, but grammatical accuracy improved only when grammar feedback was given (Fathman and Whalley 183).

The main difficulty in resolving the grammar controversy involves a virtual lack of longitudinal studies. For practical reasons, appropriate longitudinal studies are extremely difficult to design, particularly when we take into account that SLA processes, as well as the processes of acquiring writing literacy, often take many years. Ultimately, then, we do not understand exactly how the students' responses to teachers' grammatical feedback, followed by students' revising, get translated into the long-term improvement in grammatical accuracy. Ferris' frustration with this "catch 22" situation, then, is fully understandable. "If studies show improvement in short-term," she complains, "critics say that this doesn't help understand long-term effects. If long term improvement can be showed, critics say it may be a result of other factors" (*Treatment* 16). It is likely that the anti-grammar research by process advocates has been designed in an unrealistic way. It is simply impossible to see clear improvement over the course of one semester, or even a year. That doesn't mean, however, that teachers should stop correcting grammar and offering mini grammar lessons, because that might deprive our students of a chance to learn self-correction. Sherry Wynn, Besma's tutor, attributed the student's success mostly to her ability to acquire self-correction skills as a result of numerous and thorough corrections, often accompanied by metalinguistic explanations, received during two semesters of tutorial sessions. What we basically need, then, is a simpler, more common sense approach: to believe that a short-term improvement is a step toward long-term results.

My own path toward becoming an English speaker and writer, however intuitive and personal a memory of one's individual learning process may be, is a good illustration that students really need all the feedback they can get, both for content and form. Starting as a high school student in Poland, I learned English through hundreds, if not thousands, of grammatical exercises, all of them corrected and explained by my teachers. When I began composing, which was a while after the beginning of my ESL study, I also received numerous comments, including those about my language accuracy and correctness, together with appropriate grammatical terminology and rules. This was a very intense and often frustrating process, and it lasted a few years, but at some point more and more rules did become automatic, and I learned how to correct myself if I slipped.

If we were able to assume that our ESL students had taken intensive ESL courses, emphasizing grammar and syntax, prior to our writing

course, or that they were taking them simultaneously, we could perhaps abandon grammar corrections and focus exclusively on global content issues. Since this is not a realistic assumption, however, we have to include the elements of grammar and syntax both in our corrections and in minilessons, hoping that students will eventually internalize them. We are, after all, the only source our students have to learn these, and if we abdicate, there is nobody else to fill the vacuum.

Moreover, the standard process advocates' arguments that corrections stifle students' creativity and willingness to take risks are culturally misguided. This very American assumption that our students' self-esteem is fragile and can easily be damaged by criticism is simply wrong. In reality, ESL students from most cultures are very resilient; they accept the teacher's authority with much less hesitation than their American counterparts, and they are culturally conditioned to expect criticism and error correction from teachers. Besma spoke very clearly that it was natural for her Iraqi teachers to point out mistakes and equally natural for her to accept these corrections (Arabo).

Admittedly, there is a danger of overemphasizing grammar, which in certain circumstances may negatively influence fluency and creativity in writing. For most ESL students, however, the greater danger is to neglect grammar, which might simply misguide our students and result in fossilization of erroneous language forms (Johns 153). And these errors are not necessarily as benign as many process advocates would have us believe. Any teacher who has spent time in the ESL classroom will attest to how difficult it is to find a workable compromise between correcting every single error, an often futile endeavor, and focusing exclusively on content, an impossible feat when errors make content hardly accessible.

TIMING OF REVISION FEEDBACK

Another important issue regarding revision in ESL is when teachers should give feedback. Most researchers agree that in order to do any meaningful revision, students need to receive feedback earlier than in final drafts (Ferris, *Treatment* 62; Leki, "Coaching" 64). Also, it is a typical recommendation that content and form revision should be strictly separated, and global content feedback should precede any comments on more local language issues, which should occur very late in the process, at the editing stage. According to Elizabeth New, start-

ing with Zamel's research, this pattern has become part of the process approach orthodoxy (93).

Such a strict separation of content from form, however, seems to create a false dichotomy (Ferris, *Treatment* 79). The standard process template when students produce a draft and then revise, focusing on content first and leaving editing for the very final phase of writing, is simply not realistic for ESL students, who have to build content out of bricks of form currently available to them, even in composing first drafts. As I have already observed, ESL writers tend to go back and forth: write, revise, write, revise. They have to focus more on surface because they are not yet able to access the layer of deep revision. To use Alice S. Horning's terminology, ESL students typically lack metahistorical (knowledge of themselves as writers), metastrategic (knowledge of their own personality type and its influence on their writing behaviors, including revision) and metalinguistic (terminology to discuss language issues), awareness in a foreign language (8–9). These kinds of awareness are usually proportional to the level of proficiency in English. The more comfortable the students become in English, the more able they are to reach beyond the surface editing and tap into their L1 literacy skills to develop an awareness of themselves as writers in English.

Moreover, some recent empirical studies also seem to support this reasoning and undermine the content-first template for feedback and revision. Tim Ashwell, for example, tested the hypotheses of whether the content and form feedback should be provided separately, and whether content feedback followed by form feedback is superior to other patterns (231). His research confirms that students generally perform better when given feedback, but questions the strict separation between the two kinds of feedback as well as their content-before-form template. "It would appear from the evidence here," Aswell says, "that the recommended pattern of content feedback followed by form feedback is not superior to a reverse pattern or to a pattern of mixed form and content feedback. [. . .] The mixed pattern exhibited an advantage over the two other patterns" (243). Finally, then, the feedback that fits unique needs and revision patterns of ESL students involves mixing form and content comments rather than adhering to the content-first template.

MOST EFFECTIVE TECHNIQUES OF REVISION FEEDBACK

Apart from the grammar debate and the controversy surrounding the timing of content and form feedback, Ferris offers many practical and specific recommendations about what kind of feedback is the most effective. She identifies most typical ESL error areas as related to deeper language structures and lists errors in verb tense and aspect, articles and other determiners, noun endings (plural and possessive inflectional endings), errors in word form (nouns instead of adjectives) and word order as the most prevalent (*Treatment* 41–42). She also believes that recent research in corpus linguistics, the computer analysis of large samples of texts in English, designed to examine frequencies of various kinds of lexical, morphological and syntactic usage, will inform scholars and teachers about what students need to revise the most (*Treatment* 42–43).

For now, Ferris carefully examines various techniques of teacher feedback, and her very thorough and practical approach offers a lot of useful information about how teachers can structure their responses on student papers. In her view, teachers should offer indirect rather than direct feedback (marking the error but not correcting it), because it increases students' own investment in the process, except for low-proficiency students, for whom direct corrections might be more beneficial (*Treatment* 19). Moreover, she believes that for long-term success, coded feedback works better than simple circling of errors (uncoded feedback), particularly in conjunction with grammar minilessons in class (*Treatment* 20). She also contends that comprehensive rather than just selective feedback may be more appropriate for ESL students.

Naturally, specific styles of offering feedback and teaching revision skills will vary, depending on teachers' skills and preferences as well as students' needs. As Ferris so aptly suggests in one of her article titles, "One size does not fit all." However, that does not necessarily mean that all feedback is equally effective. Seriously concerned about effectiveness of teacher feedback, Ferris offers a few suggestions about appropriate comments. In her own experience, she tends to solicit good revision results to feedback by asking for specific information from students' own lives, for their responses to assigned readings, and for some grammatical error correction. Comments about higher order issues related to argumentative logic and structure do not usually achieve similarly positive results ("One Size" 149). Therefore, she rec-

ommends that teachers should always evaluate their students' competence in grammatical terminology and ability to self-correct by ear but also their ability to comprehend such composition theory terms as thesis, topic sentence, transition, etc. ("One Size" 152). Also, to empower their students, teachers need to take into account students' feedback preferences, discuss these preferences with the students, and assess effectiveness of their own feedback on the basis of students' reactions and their abilities to improve their writing (Ferris, "One Size" 153).

Finally, teachers should develop useful classroom practices to actively help students develop effective revision strategies. Ferris offers some practical advice such as pairing higher order issues with specific illustrations of what exactly could be done; discussing revision strategies in class; showing marked essays and asking what individual comments mean and how to improve writing based on these comments; offering individual assistance in oral conferences in order to help students process feedback and revise effectively ("One Size" 154).

While our knowledge of the impact teacher feedback has on revision by ESL students has certainly increased in recent years, there are still a lot of missing links, and the exact nature of the relationship between the teacher feedback and the revision process and its effectiveness remains largely unexplored. We clearly need more research on what teachers say about their students' writing and what students do as a result. In her work on responding to ESL writers, Lynn Goldstein defines her goal as "understanding of how student writing, teacher commentary and student revision mutually shape each other" (86). She criticizes the overly simplistic conceptualization of the process "as a linear one in which students write, teachers respond with commentary, and then students revise" for ignoring other factors interacting in complex ways (87). Trying to incorporate these other factors, Goldstein proposes a list of questions as possible guideposts for further research (78). I am sure that designing empirical studies targeting these specific questions will increase our understanding of this complex issue of how teacher feedback shapes revision practices of ESL writers.

PEER REVISION FEEDBACK

Another part of the classroom pedagogy related to revision that becomes more complicated for ESL students is peer feedback. A standard practice in process approaches to writing instruction, peer editing

seems far less accepted by ESL students. Gayle L. Nelson and Joan G. Carson observe that ESL students tend to mistrust their peers as critics and often fear being embarrassed in front of peers by their low skills in English (116). In their study of Chinese and Spanish speaking students, Nelson and Carson noticed the participants' strong preference for the teacher's comments to those offered by their peers. Students also seemed to treat the teacher's suggestions more seriously by implementing them more often in their revisions (124).

Similar findings emerge from Zhang's study of mostly Asian students who overwhelmingly chose teacher over peer feedback. Offered a stark choice of either feedback by the teacher or by peers, 94 percent of Zhang's study participants selected the former (Jacobs et al. 309). These results are not surprising when we realize that most ESL students come from countries where teacher-student relationships are strongly hierarchical. "In countries with a large power distance," Nelson and Carson contend, "teachers are viewed as the holders of truths, wisdom, and knowledge, and they pass this knowledge on to their students" (129). Fellow students, on the other hand, do not have this status. My Iraqi student Besma echoed this sentiment when she called peer review sessions "a waste of time." The one positive aspect of the experience she found was: "I could see writing of others, and it made me feel mine was not so bad" (Arabo).

Such differences in cultural norms are also the most convincing explanation for other findings by Nelson and Carson, and particularly for students' strong preference for negative comments and their very different communication styles, which had a strong impact on the effectiveness of the peer response session. Both Chinese and Spanish students understood the purpose of the session as a search for mistakes in each other's essays, so they soon began playing down positive comments as simple sweetening pills for problems and mistakes (121). "Well, for me I hope they give me negative things because I need to revise my paper," said one of the Chinese participants in the transcript from the videotaped discussions (qtd. in Nelson and Carson 122). While both groups shared this inclination for negative comments, the Chinese and the Spanish students viewed their participation in peer review groups very differently. Coming from a more collectivist culture, the Chinese students focused on maintaining positive group relations, often by toning down or avoiding any direct commentary on other students' papers. Their Spanish peers, on the other hand, viewed

their group interactions as task-oriented and focused on cooperation in order to improve their works (Nelson and Carson 126–27).

Nelson and Carson's examples help us realize the complexity of the standard peer review routine when it is implemented in the ESL classrooms, where varying cultural norms of interpersonal communication and often varying levels of our students' language proficiency make effectiveness of peer responses less guaranteed than in regular L1 composition classrooms (Ferris, "Responding" 130). Therefore, it is hardly surprising that in the final conclusions from their study, citing language and cultural difficulties, Nelson and Carson recommend, "It may be time to reconsider the use of peer response in ESL composition classes" (128). To back up this conclusion they refer to "a growing body of ESL research [which] indicates that peer response may not be as effective with nonnative speakers of English as with native speakers" (129).

However, this general skepticism regarding the role of peer feedback in the ESL writing pedagogy, while understandable, does not perhaps have to be so radical. Ferris, for example, admits that peer responses in ESL classes are a little like "the blind leading the blind," but also values editing skills students acquire by working on their peers' papers (*Treatment* 102). Other researchers note the following benefits of peer collaboration: receiving social support from peers, learning through collaboration, receiving a broader audience for their writing, and receiving alternatives to teacher feedback, to name just a few (Jacobs et al. 308). Also, including a peer review stage in the students' work on the paper tends to increase the number of drafts and, consequently, lengthens the writing process. Thus, it becomes a very handy practical application of Ann Raimes' contention about ESL students' need for "more time" (55).

While ESL students do indeed prefer feedback by teachers to that by students, that does not mean that they do not value both, even if it is to a different extent. Such a high percentage of teacher preference in Zhang's research may be a direct result of his question formulated in stark either/or terms. In the study by George M. Jacobs et al. , the question was formulated differently and it did, in fact, yield very different results. In this study, participants were to choose a positive or a negative response to the following statement: "I prefer to have feedback from other students as one type of feedback on my writing," and

93 percent expressed a desire to have peer feedback included in their writing process (311).

Explaining the reasons for their preference, the participants mentioned new ideas provided by peers and the peers' ability to spot problems they had not noticed themselves. Students also noticed the benefit of working on papers by others and saw their peers as more understanding, more encouraging, less threatening, and less busy than teachers (Jacobs et al. 312). Summing up the results of their study, Jacobs et al. say, "Although the students ranked teacher-centered feedback higher than feedback from their peers, the results show clearly that they did value both" (313). The researchers very convincingly present their findings as "middle path on the issue of types of feedback, in which teacher, peer, and self-directed feedback are judiciously combined" (Jacobs et al. 314).

This "middle path" approach allows for more revision opportunities and provides our ESL students with a more varied audience input, but we cannot simply ignore the skeptical voices. Therefore, we need to examine possible modifications to the standard peer response routine in order to find out how to make it appropriate for the ESL students and help them revise their papers most effectively.

One such modification is peer response training, which ESL students seem to need much more than their L1 counterparts. Assuming that a peer-review session is a rather self-explanatory exercise, teachers often introduce it briefly and then just think their students will catch on as they do it. While this assumption may work with L1 students, who most likely did peer reviews in high school and who work in their native language and culture, ESL students are not familiar with the concept and do not have the skills to review works of others. Recognizing this difficulty, and generally a bit skeptical about the practice, Ferris emphasizes that students should be "trained" and sessions should be "structured and supervised by teachers" (*Treatment* 103). Also Jacobs et al. stress the importance of a "well-planned implementation process" (314), necessary if peer feedback is to be successful. Their article offers a few practical suggestions of what teachers could do: sharing their own experiences of giving and receiving feedback from peers, providing sample peer review forms, critiquing student feedback, sharing models of successful peer comments in class, emphasizing the need for a balance between positive and negative responses,

and facilitating positive attitudes to avoid hostility among students (Jacobs et al. 314).

Similarly, in her article “Preparing ESL Students for Peer Response,” E. Catherine Berg offers an elaborate set of guidelines for training students to become more successful peer reviewers. The goals of her training, designed to last several days, are to convince students of the value of the practice, socialize them to each other, teach them to focus on the selected issues in their writing, and help them acquire appropriate terminology for their responses (20). To achieve these goals, Berg, like Jacobs et al. , emphasizes specific examples and modeling exercises in the classroom. In her set of eleven guidelines, the following seem the most specific and useful in the classroom pedagogy:

- “Demonstrate and personalize the peer response experience by displaying several drafts of a text written by someone who the students know that demonstrate how peer comments helped improve the writing.”
- “Conduct a collaborative, whole-class response activity using a text written by someone unknown to students and stress the importance of revising the clarity and rhetorical-level aspects rather than sentence-level errors.”
- “Familiarize students with the response sheet by showing samples and explaining its purpose as a tool designed to help them focus on important areas of the writing assignment.”
- “Involve students in a response to a collaborative writing project by having them use the peer response sheet to respond in pairs or groups to a paragraph written by another group of students. Based on the responses, have the pairs or groups then revise their original collaborative paragraph.”
- “Provide revision guidelines by highlighting good revision strategies and explaining that peer response helps authors understand the difference between intended and perceived meaning.”
- “Study examples of successful and unsuccessful peer responses using videotapes or printed samples to examine level of student engagement, language used, and topics discussed.” (Berg, “Preparing” 21)

While all these guidelines and practical classroom applications of the concept that ESL students have to be trained to become successful peer respondents certainly sound very convincing, we need to know if training students actually results in visible improvements in their revised essays. In another article, “The Effects of Trained Peer Response on ESL Students’ Revision Types and Writing Quality,” Berg verifies the success of peer response training. Comparing revision outcomes after peer feedback by trained and untrained students, Berg found that trained students’ responses generated more content changes (“Effects” 226). She also discovered that trained students generally scored higher on improving the overall quality of their own drafts as a result of peer feedback followed by revision (Berg, “Effects” 228).

In general, then, even though research findings regarding the peer review routine in ESL classrooms may seem confusing, its closer examination points out to complexity rather than contradiction. Clearly, in L2 classes, peer review should not be used reflexively, as simply a natural stage in revising, the way it is treated by the process orthodoxy. However, when introduced carefully, with well-designed student training, and without unrealistic expectations, peer review should remain a viable part of the ESL classroom pedagogy.

ALTERNATIVE STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT REVISION

Another technique of assisting ESL students in developing their revision skills is self-monitoring. One of the least popular, least studied and, perhaps, least practical ways of facilitating revision for ESL writers, self-monitoring promises a high degree of autonomy. Andy Cresswell, one proponent of the method, explains self-monitoring as an interactive technique, where students write annotations about language and composition issues they confront as their drafts evolve, to which the teachers respond in writing. He believes that, like peer evaluation, self-monitoring encourages “reader-based prose,” because it pushes students to become aware of writing as a form of communication with the audience and aware of themselves as personally vested in the revision process. Ultimately, students are expected to become their own readers and “to develop heuristics to solve composing problems independently” (Cresswell 235). This explains why self-monitoring does not appear a very practical option. As we know, the ability to self-monitor and revise without any external feedback characterizes

the most proficient writers, and expecting ESL students to be able to easily acquire this very advanced skill does not sound very realistic.

Apart from carefully designed teacher feedback and peer review practice with prior training, there are other classroom revision strategies that appear more helpful to ESL students than self-monitoring. One such strategy is contrastive rhetoric, a branch of linguistics and SLA theory, which explains problems of ESL writers by referring to the rhetorical strategies typical for their first languages (Connor 5). Developing Robert Kaplan's seminal ideas, contrastive rhetoric emphasizes different cultural norms internalized as different discourse modes in various languages. In his famous "doodles" article (1966), Kaplan analyzed paragraph development in ESL student's essays and related it to students' L1 backgrounds. Using drawings to illustrate lines of reasoning typical for different cultures, he suggested that Semitic languages favor developing ideas in a series of parallel coordinate clauses, Asian languages prefer an indirect approach with the main point presented at the end, and Romance languages as well as Russian lean toward digressiveness. Naturally, all of these rhetorical conventions are very different from the typical linear organization of Anglo-European expository prose (Connor 15). In teaching ESL students, these cultural preferences constitute possible obstacles, but if approached with full awareness, they may actually become useful points of reference in guiding students toward new rhetorical conventions. Also, this approach may be socially helpful to students as it celebrates their own language and cultural heritage (Connor 26).

When carefully examined, however, contrastive rhetoric has serious practical limitations. Expecting teachers, whose students come from multiple backgrounds, to study individual contrasts between English and these various languages, and then formulate appropriate revision strategies, seems hardly realistic. Besides, topical structure analysis, the recommended tool of contrastive rhetoric, appears arcane. As Ulla Connor and Mary Farmer say, the method expects students to "assess both the global coherence (what the essay is about) and local coherence (how sentences build meaning in relation to each other and the overall discourse topic)" and to chart the progress of sentence topics (128). While conceptually interesting, it requires teachers and students to have a strong background in linguistics and, ultimately, does not seem practical.

Other means of facilitating revision, while also potentially promising, would require further research to check whether there really is a sufficient gain in revision skills and writing improvement to validate their use. Computer technology certainly has that potential but it also requires training in peer feedback and explicit instruction on revision and computer strategies (New 80). Also, collaborative writing assignments may have a positive influence on student revision practices. Alan Hirvela's experimental, fully collaborative communities of readers and writers offer ESL students an opportunity to negotiate choices throughout the entire creative process, from drafting, peer reviewing, to revising. This group production offers ESL students "greater opportunities for meaningful review of what they are learning and practicing in a writing course." As Hirvela adds, "From a general language teaching perspective, students are able to practice the target language in authentic and meaningful communicative contexts as they interact with each other," (12). Since the ESL population is so diverse in cultural backgrounds as well as in L2 proficiency levels however, it is easy to imagine many problems in creating a collaborative setting.

The strategy that seems more effective than many others in helping ESL students improve their revision skills is individual tutoring. Whether done by faculty members in separate tutorial courses, or in writing centers by teachers or trained student tutors, the procedure can be very effective, particularly when there is close collaboration between the writing teacher and the tutor. Besma, my successful Iraqi student, was placed in a tutorial support section, taught by another faculty member from my department, with whom I frequently communicated about the student's progress. The results were astounding: she learned such high-level revision skills and improved her writing so dramatically that she received the second highest grade in the mainstreamed course. My own experiences as an ESL student were very similar to Besma's. In order to pass a highly competitive entrance exam to the English Department at the Gdansk University, I had to be highly proficient in English, including writing. Because Polish public schools provided rather ineffective foreign language training, my parents hired a tutor. Even though I started at the beginners' level, after a year of two-hour sessions, twice a week, I passed the writing exam. Of course, again, the method would have to be checked in a more disciplined context of a formal research involving more than one or two subjects.

Above all else, our ESL students need more time and more individual attention than their L1 counterparts. Therefore, reducing the number of assignments, extending time limits, providing more exercises explicitly focusing on revision, preceded by some form of carefully designed feedback (Leki, *Understanding* 87), and, whenever possible, offering individual tutorial support seem the most practical solutions for ESL classrooms. Achieving the environment in which teachers will be able to respond effectively to specific needs of their L2 students will only be possible in small writing classes. The current financial predicament of many public colleges and universities creates a push for increasing class sizes and mainstreaming ESL students, but they will not benefit from integration. Since their needs are significantly different from those of their L1 peers, ESL students should be taught in separate classes, which will enable them to focus on their revision skills and consequently to improve their writing (Silva 202).

Also, it would be extremely helpful if L2 students enrolled in writing classes were offered support in regular ESL courses, either prior to enrollment or simultaneously, or at least were required to receive a certain TOEFL score as a prerequisite for the course. The most holistic of all language skills, writing involves higher order thinking, reading, and comprehension skills, which our ESL students often transfer from their L1, as well as proficiency in English. Both elements, literacy skills and language proficiency, are equally important. That is why the frequently perceived dichotomy between our students' writing abilities and their language proficiency is highly problematic. When Leki says, "L2 writers don't need more work with language but rather with writing" (*Understanding* 78), I am provoked to ask: What language will they write in? How can they write in English if often they do not know English? Of course, I am not trying to play down the importance of general literacy skills Leki refers to in the quote, but the transfer of these literacy skills from our students' first language cannot occur if their proficiency in English is not high enough. The main question should be how to successfully tap into our students' L1 literacy skills and enable them to transfer these skills into acceptable English, following the language, genre, and audience conventions appropriate for the academic context.

Therefore, there is an urgent need for a separate theory of L2 writing, and the newest research supports such a reconfiguration of the discipline. To argue for this, William Grabe, for example, presents a

long list of differences between L1 and L2 writers, including such specific items as epistemological differences in values, beliefs and cultural socialization, perceptions of functions of writing and writing topics, audience awareness, textual conventions, and cultural attitudes towards plagiarism, to name just a few (46). Such significant differences make it impossible to teach ESL writers the same way we teach their L1 counterparts. This theory of L2 writing needs to bridge the gap between the TESOL approach, focusing entirely on English language skills and often perceiving students' native language as an impediment to English proficiency, and the process approach in the composition studies, focusing on native language literacy but ignoring the need for English grammar, syntax and other sentence-level features. Finally, then, the field needs to be defined more precisely as a separate area between TESOL and composition studies, studying the unique needs of the ESL student population.