

# **The Power of Writing, the Writing of Power Approaches to Adult ESOL Writing Instruction**

**Elsa Auerbach**

*If you had walked into an adult ESOL class 20 years ago, you might have seen students doing little writing other than completing short exercises designed to reinforce particular grammar points or language functions. The teacher may have evaluated this writing on the basis of formal correctness; students may have had little opportunity to write extended pieces in which they expressed their own ideas. Today, you may see exactly the same kind of writing in some adult ESOL classes; in many others, however, you're likely to see students filling out job applications, writing notes to their children's teachers, or practicing taking phone messages. They may be writing journal entries, doing free writing, composing stories about their lives, or writing down folktales from their homelands. Some may be revising their work for publication. Others may be working together to draft letters to the editor of a newspaper about a community problem or to craft a petition to the local school board. The teacher may be writing alongside students, responding to their writing by asking questions and sharing experiences, or giving mini-lessons about a particular grammar point.*

At first glance, the changes over the past 20 years can be construed as representing a new eclecticism in writing pedagogy: a "let a hundred flowers bloom" philosophy. However, underneath this proliferation of practices are several distinct tendencies that reflect theoretical developments in the fields of second language acquisition, composition theory, and literacy studies. Although most of the research in ESOL writing has been done in higher education contexts (see Cumming, 1998; Raimes, 1998) and there has been minimal writing research in adult ESOL contexts, pedagogical practices in both contexts are informed by similar approaches. Understanding the differences and similarities between the approaches is important because writing instruction is so powerful. The way that writing is taught sends learners messages about who they are as writers, what is entailed in the act of writing, what they can do with writing, and what writing can do for them. In fact, writing instruction often goes further than shaping conceptions about writing itself: it can also contribute to constructing learners' sense of their own identities and possibilities (Ullman, 1997). In this article, I present five current approaches to teaching second language writing, the theoretical perspectives on which they are based, their implications for practice, and the messages they send learners.

## **Behavioral and Functional Approaches:**

### **Writing for Assimilation**

One of the first departures from grammar-oriented writing instruction for adult ESOL students in nonacademic contexts was the functional or competency-based approach (Savage, 1993). This approach, which evolved in the late 1970s, is based on the view that, for immigrants or refugees, the priority is survival; according to this view, their needs for writing focus primarily on very functionally-oriented, context-specific writing tasks. Thus, where grammar-based approaches value what students know about language, this view emphasizes what students can do with language. It is concerned with the behaviors and performance demanded in particular domains or roles rather than with grammar per se. For example, workplace educators may develop an inventory of writing tasks required for a specific job and base writing instruction on that inventory. As such, this approach is parallel to the English for special purposes (ESP) approach used in academic contexts. Often writing tasks are integrated into thematic life skills modules along with reading and oral language skills: reading want ads, filling out job applications, and preparing for interviews may go hand in hand as tasks associated with finding a job. Assessment is based

on the ability to demonstrate competence; this approach is congruent with outcomes-based models currently being mandated through federal policy initiatives.

Proponents of this approach argue that it will enable learners to participate in the contexts of their daily lives competently and meet the practical demands of work, family, and community life. It will, they say, prepare new immigrants and refugees to succeed according to the expectations of American society. The message here is that being able to perform the writing tasks associated with specific contexts, norms, and societally defined roles will result in assimilation into the American mainstream.

### **Cognitive Approaches: Writing for Self-Expression and Meaning-Making**

As second language acquisition and composition theories have developed, an emphasis on writing as a cognitive, meaning-making process has become increasingly popular. Critiquing behavioral and functional approaches, believers in this approach argue that writing should be much more than filling out forms or responding to externally defined norms. All too often, they claim, the functional approach limits both the kinds of writing students can do and the roles for which it prepares them. It trains students to fit into the social order as it exists, which, for refugees and immigrants, often means filling menial roles or dead-end jobs that require little thinking or extended writing (Tollefson, 1989).

In the cognitive view, often called the "process" approach to writing, the focus on meaningful communication for learner-defined purposes derives from second language acquisition theory. The focus on the process of writing as a vehicle for reflection and exploration of ideas comes from composition theory. The content, practices, and purposes of ESOL writing inspired by this approach differ from those in functional classes: writing becomes a way of making sense of experience or discovering what one thinks rather than performing functionally useful tasks. Thus, writing often starts with personal narratives, as titles such as *Writing Our Lives* (Peyton & Staton, 1996) suggest. Literary forms such as poetry are also often incorporated (Kazemek & Rigg, 1995). While instruction focuses primarily on writing to create meaning, form is addressed both implicitly and explicitly: advocates of this approach argue that increasing accuracy evolves through drafting, revision, and editing; in addition, teachers often incorporate mini-lessons about relevant linguistic points.

Common practices in the process approach include free writing in journals, writing extended narratives through a cyclical process, and publishing student writing. In dialogue journals, students write about thoughts, experiences, reactions to texts, or issues of importance to them, and teachers respond to the content of students' entries by sharing experiences, ideas, and reactions as well as modeling correct usage (see Peyton & Staton, 1993). The cyclical process of composing extended narratives involves generating ideas through free writing and brainstorming, drafting, conferencing with peers and teachers, revising organization and content, editing for form, and, in some cases, publishing writing for a broader audience. These publications give writers real audiences and purposes for their writing (Peyton, 1993). The message this approach sends is that learners' lives and voices have value and can become the vehicle for language acquisition as well as self-discovery.

### **The Socio-Cultural Practices Approach: Writing for Affirmation**

A third perspective coming from the field of literacy studies focuses on socio-cultural practices rather than functional behaviors or cognitive processes. Literacy ethnographers argue that cognitive views of literacy and process approaches assume a universality to writing that is not borne out by research into actual literacy uses (Street, 1984). Their research shows that ways of acquiring and using writing vary from culture to culture, from context to context, and always depend on who is using it, under what conditions, and for what purposes (Barton & Ivanic, 1991). According to this view, people are informally

socialized into the local, culture-specific literacy practices of the communities in which they are immersed. Because the out-of-school literacy practices of people from "mainstream" backgrounds are most congruent with school literacy practices, they are at an advantage when they encounter literacy instruction in school.

To value the range of practices that students bring and utilize them as resources, advocates of this view propose starting with what people know and do, by investigating how people actually use and acquire writing within specific families and communities (see, for example, Klassen, 1991). The point is to build on what people know, and to incorporate their local cultural knowledge into schooling, drawing on what Luis Moll (1992) calls their funds of knowledge. Thus, pedagogical practices may encourage the use of culture-specific genres, purposes, and content. Examples include a book about the many uses of aloe vera and other natural remedies produced by a class of Latino elders (Costanzo & Paxton, 1999) and a literacy text based on Creole proverbs developed in a Creole literacy project (Auerbach et al., 1996). Along with this goal of cultural affirmation, promoting the first language as a vehicle for cultural maintenance is often emphasized. Students in a Hmong project in California decided to learn to read and write in Hmong to preserve their first language and pass along oral histories to their children (Kang et al., 1996). The message in this approach is that learners' cultural knowledge and ways of using literacy are valuable and can become a bridge to new learning. Writing is a vehicle of social and cultural affirmation.

### **The Genre Approach: Writing for Access to Powerful Discourses**

A fourth approach argues that both the cognitive and socio-cultural approaches to writing instruction, despite claiming to empower learners, assure their continued exclusion. They argue that because certain literacies yield more power than others, it's not enough for learners to share their stories, find their voices, and celebrate their cultures. Process writing and immersion in meaningful usage may be fine for people who come from the dominant culture, but they obscure the rules of the game for everyone else. Delpit (1995), for example, argues that what's important is not voice in itself but teaching the discourses of power. She favors explicit instruction in the rules and standards that are valued in the dominant culture. The genre approach, popular in England and Australia, proposes deconstructing dominant genres, analyzing them from a linguistic point of view, and reproducing them (Hasan & Williams, 1996). Through overt instruction students learn to identify specific text types (narrative, factual, procedural, and persuasive), analyze their structural and linguistic features, and generate their own texts that conform to the conventions of each genre (see Spiegel & Sunderland, 1999). For example, students might be given two different texts, such as a news report about the housing crisis and a letter to the editor about housing discrimination. They would be invited to compare what the texts are about, why they were written, when one would read each, where they would be published, and how the language and structure of the texts differ (USWE, 1997). The students might then use this information to produce their own parallel texts. The message sent by this approach is that mastery of the genres of power will yield access to power.

### **The Critical Approach: Writing for Social Change**

A fifth view argues that neither the socio-cultural practices view nor the genre view actually delivers what it promises: where the socio-cultural practices folks focus on writing practices, and the genre folks focus on text structures, the social change folks focus on social issues and action for change. They argue that it's not enough to affirm learners' cultures and celebrate their voices; they say that it is crucial to look at literacy within the context of larger institutional forces. As Giroux says, "Student experience has to be understood as part of an interlocking web of power relations" (1987, p.177). Social change advocates say that the genre approach makes the mistake of claiming that acquiring the discourse of power will actually lead to gaining power (Luke, 1996). In fact, they say, experience, history, and research show that other factors such as gender, ethnicity, and race are equally important in determining access. This approach

argues that all writing pedagogy has an implicit political stance, whether or not it is acknowledged (Severino, 1998).

So within the critical approach, writing pedagogy is tied to analyzing student experience in relation to broader economic and political relations. Writing focuses on content drawn from the social context of learners' lives (connecting the word and the world, as Paulo Freire would say) and is used in the service of action for change (Freire & Macedo, 1987). For example, a parents' group in Los Angeles that began meeting the week after the L.A. riots used their classes to explore their fears and concerns about what was happening in their communities. They then wrote a book not only describing their experiences but also analyzing what was happening and why, and distributed the book in their community to prompt further dialogue (Orellana, 1996). In a Boston ESOL class, students compared and analyzed incidents of police harassment after one received an unjust traffic ticket. They then wrote a letter to the editor of a local paper about police discrimination (Nash et al., 1992). The message this approach sends is that writing can become a context for exploring critical social issues and a tool for taking action to improve the conditions of one's life.

## **In Conclusion**

Certain debates in the field of ESOL writing transcend or cut across approaches. They include questions such as: What is possible with new writers? Where should one start? What is the role of the first language in ESOL writing? Should learners with minimal schooling first learn to write in their first language? What should one teach more proficient second language learners? Should they be encouraged to utilize first language resources in second language writing or be forbidden to do so? How do the social contexts in which writing is taught shape the pedagogy? How can writing instruction become a tool for empowerment? It is not possible to explore these issues here, but examples of ways to address these questions can be found in work by Atkinson (1987), Auerbach (1993), Barahona (1996), Shamash (1990), and Smoke (1998).

My hope is that this article has shown how the practices described in the opening paragraph reflect different approaches to ESOL writing. I hope it is also clear that certain common elements underlie current approaches and that, in practice, writing instruction often draws elements from each of them. There is widespread consensus within the field of ESOL writing about several points: 1) that a focus on meaning rather than form (grammatical correctness) encourages writing development; 2) that instruction should stress writing for real reasons, to real audiences in order to promote authentic communication; 3) that writing should be contextualized and that content should be meaningful and relevant to learners; 4) that learners need some degree of overt instruction, which includes talk about writing, substantive, specific feedback, and multiple opportunities for revision; 5) that social and cultural variation in writing practices and genres needs to be taken into account; and 6) that all writing pedagogy reflects a stance about the learner in relation to the social order. The most important point is that teachers need to be conscious of implications of their practices and of the power of the messages that their pedagogical practices convey.

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#### **About the Author**

*Elsa Auerbach* is Associate Professor in the English Department and the Applied Linguistics Program at the University of Massachusetts/Boston. She has worked with several university-community collaborative adult literacy and ESOL projects in the Boston area. Her publications include numerous articles and books on critical approaches to adult ESOL/literacy, participatory curriculum development, and family literacy.

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