

Book Review

Teaching ESL Composition. (1998). Dana Ferris & John S. Hedgcock. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers: London, 329pp.

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Rarely does a professional text come along that elicits overwhelming approval from EFL/ESL teachers, teacher-trainers, graduate students and researchers alike. *Teaching ESL composition* by Dana Ferris and John S. Hedgcock is just such a book. Perhaps this book has received accolades because it reaches all these audiences, and it does it well.

Teaching ESL composition, published in 1998, hit the market at a time when there seemed to be a dearth of more sophisticated, more comprehensive works on second language writing than had been published until this time. Ilona Leki's *Understanding ESL writers: A guide for teachers*, published in 1992, and Joy Reid's *Teaching ESL writing*, printed in 1993, were responses to the void in professional books dealing specifically with second language writing. Reid's and Leki's books are seminal. Up until the early 1990s there was no single, comprehensive volume which dealt with *writing* as an issue, as a subject worth serious study. While those books were unique when published, they are now dated.

The history of research into student writing practices shows us why ESL/EFL writing was a neglected field. Most of the important studies of L1 writing began in the early 1970s with the work of such people as Janet Emig and Nancy Sommers. Their investigations into the process students use when writing began a decade of rich research. In the 1980s socio-cognitive research [see Flower & Hayes' "A cognitive process theory of writing" (1981)] added other dimensions to what came to be known as the *process approach*. While this rich research accumulated for L1 composition, there was little-to-no research into L2 writing. These were indeed the "dark ages" in second language writing research except for a few studies published by such people as Vivian Zamel and Joy Reid. Without the research to transform writing pedagogy, ESL/EFL teachers continued to focus on form over content, relying on the regimen of the build-up approach to teaching writing. This method dictated that students must get a sentence right before going on to a paragraph and then to multi-paragraphs and so on. Thus we have—literally—dozens of ESL texts from the 1970s and 1980s which treat learning-to-write as learning-to-be-correct. Ann Raimés' student text, *Exploring through writing: A process approach to ESL com-*

position, made waves when it first hit the market in the 1980s, and it was soon adopted by many second language composition teachers.

Since the early 1990s, ESL/EFL writing research and pedagogy has changed, as evidenced by the birth of many publications dealing exclusively with second language writing. The *Journal of Second Language Writing* was first published in 1992; it became an immediate success. A look at any recent *TESOL Quarterly* shows the wealth of articles dealing with composition, literacy, and other writing-related issues.

Let us now turn to take a look at what makes Ferris and Hedgcock's *Teaching ESL composition* such a successful publication, and why it's my "book of choice" for ESL/EFL composition teachers, teacher-trainers, graduate students, and researchers.

First, the text is comprehensive in its scope. The authors not only present *what* has happened in second language composition pedagogy but also *why* it has happened and *how* writing instruction has been transformed. For instance, Ferris and Hedgcock present the history of second language writing research from the 1960s until the present, putting into perspective the ebb and flow and the rationale of particular methodologies. Chapter 1 begins with an overview of the practical and theoretical issues in ESL writing, drawing on this historic grounding; Chapter 9 concludes the book by investigating the use of technology in the writing class and a discussion of state-of-the-art software applications.

Secondly, the authors have done their homework. The chapters are full of references to important research done in the field of L2 composition. This discussion of research studies is presented in a way that makes it clear how strands of research mesh with other investigations. Even more, the book has an excellent comprehensive bibliography at the end; this resource is so complete that it could be the starting point for graduate theses or research investigations.

Finally, *Teaching ESL composition* is user-friendly. The book is readable; it is easy to use and pleasant in its non-textual features. Each chapter begins with "Questions for Reflection" and an introduction and ends with an "Application Activities" section including well thought-out activities requiring students to apply theory to a hypothetical situation.

Another reader-friendly aspect of *Teaching ESL Composition* is the liberal sprinkling of charts, figures, tables, and graphs displaying information in easy-to-understand format. For example, Figure 4.3 shows an example of a writing assignment check-list. Another of my favorite visuals is Figure 1.4, displaying the differences between English L1 writers and ESL writers and clearly highlighting the differences between these two groups of writers.

I find two other aspects of this book to be helpful: 1) The comprehensive *Author Index* and *Subject Index* help locate important information easily. 2) The descriptive subject headings and subheadings are clear, accurate, and helpful.

Perhaps the best recommendation I can offer for Ferris and Hedgcock's ***Teaching ESL Composition*** is this: when I polled twenty MA TESOL students about textbooks (professional books) they found valuable and would keep for their personal libraries, the Ferris and Hedgcock text received overwhelming praise.

One Japanese MA TESOL student began by saying, "I liked the discussion of scholarship, the reference section, the information on giving feedback to students on their writing ...oh I just loved everything about this book!" Another student, an American with an undergraduate degree in international business, reported that the book was well-written and clear even for someone coming into teaching ESL with little background in applied linguistics or composition theory. This student appreciated that the book didn't "talk down" to an audience of graduate students or practicing ESL teachers. Still another MA TESOL student, an experienced teacher from Costa Rica, capped off her praise by saying, "I used to be afraid to teach composition at my university. But now I have confidence...because the book has given me the *whys* and *hows* that I need to teach writing."

Teaching ESL Composition has been enlightening and successful for professionals and students alike. The publishing company, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc, recognize this and are considering a new edition in 2003-2004.