Will Publishing ESL Students' Writing Keep Them from Perishing?

by Norman W. Evans and Priscilla F. Whittaker

Anyone who has ever taken pen in hand is frustratingly aware of what Isaac Singer meant when he said that there ". . . are no miracles in writing. The only thing that produces good writing is hard work." As most of us involved with language teaching are aware, when the writing has to be done in a second language the "hard work" is generally multiplied many times over. Writing in a second language is not an easy task, yet it is one of the most valuable skills a language learner will ever develop.

Valuable as it may be, the skill of writing still requires a great deal of time and patience to develop. At Brigham Young University—Hawaii Campus it takes English Language Institute students more time to reach exit criteria in writing classes than in the three other skill tracks (reading, speaking, and listening). This is due, in part, to the fact that our ELI students are not mainstreamed into the university. They must pass a qualification exam (a portfolio of essays) in order to enter freshman English. In most semesters, enrollment in ELI writing classes is thirty percent larger than that in any of the other skills classes. Consequently, students often become discouraged, or altogether disinterested in writing before they ever attain a level of proficiency adequate to function on the college level. These students are not unique; such a problem seems to be the rule rather than the exception in many ESL programs. A royal road to good writing simply does not exist.

Nevertheless, certain factors can facilitate the development of writing skills, for example: good texts, well trained teachers, motivation, lots of writing practice, and a wide variety of related activities. One such activity that has proved to be very successful in our program is publishing the best of student writing.

Admittedly, the idea is not new. Most of us have at one time or another been in a writing class where the teacher has reproduced, usually anonymously, some outstanding student writing with the purpose of showing the rest of the class what kind of work is possible as well as expected. Such a practice typically results in student remarks like "Well if someone else can, I certainly should be able to." or "I am sure I can do that well." Thus the students are motivated or try harder, and the students whose work is being displayed can relish the sense of accomplishment. It was just such attitudes we hoped to generate with our best-of-student writing publication—*The ELI Expositor.*

Rationale

We have, in the year-and-a-half history of the *Expositor,* discovered many good reasons for publishing student work: it teaches care in writing, develops students' sense of accomplishment, motivates struggling students, helps bring students and teachers closer together, and reinforces the importance of audience in the writing process.

Unfortunately, students (as well as teachers) sometimes lose sight of the real purpose of a writing class. This is especially true when grammar and writing are taught together as one subject. Too often, students learn how to get good grades and overlook the real objective—becoming effective communicators. A high mark on a proficiency test or an "A" on a verb tense exam are often misperceived as measures of success in a writing class. In reality of course, true success should be measured by how well an idea is communicated to a reader. One of the best ways to learn how to communicate an idea is by writing something to be read by others—many others. *The ELI Expositor*

has been instrumental in teaching our students that successful writers must be effective communicators and not necessarily "A" students.

In addition, our students have learned that anyone who is ultimately successful as a writer must learn that good writing involves more than "writing it Sunday night and handing it in Monday morning." Good writing requires revisions (note the plural). Hemingway said it best when he was asked by a reporter how much rewriting he did. Hemingway's response was that he reworte the last page of *A Farewell to Arms* thirty-nine times before he was satisfied, "before getting the words right." (Plimpton 1965: 222). Since writing submitted to *The ELI Expositor* is expected to be as grammatically correct as possible, students learn the necessity of revising. One student reportedly spent nearly three hours "getting right" her two-paragraph submission on clothing trends in Kiribati.

Perhaps the most obvious reason for publishing students' writing lies in the fact that it clarifies to students that the real purpose in writing is to communicate. Most writers will agree that they write better when they have something they want to say and someone to say it to. The *Expositor* gives students a much wider and more definite audience than they normally have in the classroom. As a result, students' work becomes more meaningful and less like busy work when they are writing for *The ELI Expositor*.

A publication of student work also creates a fountain of ideas and non-intimidating examples for other writing students. Such a publication is a good source for students struggling with the age-old question "What can I write about?" Not only are the ideas usually of some interest, but the examples are not beyond the students' capabilities. In contrast, the writing in textbooks is frequently so far beyond ESL students' abilities that it serves only to make the writing process more frustrating. Unlike textbook samples, the writing of their peers is not normally intimidating to students.

The list of benefits that result from the publication of ESL students' writing goes on. Students become highly motivated when something they have written is published. (Some students may never get this kind of positive reinforcement anywhere else.) Another benefit is the close working relationship that develops between students and teachers. Often students who wouldn't normally go near a teacher's office will seek their instructor's assistance in revising an essay when it is to be published in *The ELI Expositor*. A student publication also creates a forum for students to vent their grievances—whether they concern dormitory conditions or inequities in the grading system. In short, the reasons to publish student work far outweigh the reasons not to. There are, however, some challenges to publishing student writing.

Procedures and Problems

At the outset we planned to have a publication that would help our students by (1) giving them a definite but wider audience, (2) showing them what kind of writing their peers as well as they, themselves, were capable of writing, and (3) providing a means of exchanging ideas. Nevertheless, all of this had to be accomplished with a minimal amount of time and money; neither were in great abundance.

We wanted to have a publication that would be helpful to our students, but we did not want to commit ourselves to something that would require an inordinate amount of time, since (like all teachers) we had other responsibilities that could not be neglected.

We first looked at other programs that published their students' work. This investigation quickly revealed that there are nearly as many ways to publish student writing as there are ways to teach writing: publishing a once-a-year literary collection, reproducing exemplary work on a particular class assignment, submitting students' work to the school newspaper, or creating an ELI newspaper (students become editors, reporters, typists, etc.). Even though each of these approaches had definite strengths, their weaknesses made them impractical for our

purposes. Publishing only once a year (or semester) does not provide ongoing motivation. Reproducing work on a class basis limits the range of topics as well as the number of submissions. In the school newspaper, the competition from more advanced writers is so keen that very few, if any, ESL learners even attempt a submission. And having an ELI newsletter would be simply too time consuming to be practical in our program. Our students do not have time for a lot of extra work; nor do we.

The most feasible approach was to create a publication that would include our students' best writing from their regular class assignments. However, rather than publish student work on an individual classroom basis we decided to publish writing from all levels of the ELI program together. This

---

Norman Evans coordinates the writing program, and Fawn Whittaker is the listening coordinator in the English Language Institute of Brigham Young University—Hawaii Campus.

---

way our students could compare their writing with that of students at all levels, they would not be burdened with an extra task, and we would have the work of nearly one hundred and fifty students from which to make our selections.

Collecting and Selecting

Collecting and selecting student writing proved to be the most difficult part of the process. In the first place, as editors, we made sure that our own students submitted writing, but getting work from other writing teachers' classes was quite another matter. Initially, other teachers were not nearly as enthusiastic about the project. Consequently, their students were not submitting work to the *Expositor*.

The solution to this problem actually turned out to be a benefit. We asked other teachers to be in charge of some small *Expositor*-related task, such as keeping a file of all the submissions, or helping evaluate the essays. Delegating responsi-

bility not only lightened our load but also involved other teachers in the process. Soon the number of submissions from other classes increased, as did teacher enthusiasm.

Another problem in the collecting process was that there wasn't always a lot of "publishable" work available. Often at the beginning of a semester, class assignments were fundamental writing exercises—not very interesting reading. Even when more interesting work did start coming in, it usually took several weeks to be revised. This did not prove to be a serious problem, however, since the *Expositor* was printed on a flexible schedule—if and when there was a sufficient number of submissions and an adequate amount of time.

Once enough submissions had been handed in, the selection process began. Only very general guidelines were given to the evaluators. They were to select the best papers according to (1) correct use of English, (2) appeal to the readers, and (3) creativity. They were not always in total agreement on which writing was best, of course, but there were usually eight or ten essays that were selected by a majority of the evaluators.

An additional problem we encountered (and still have not solved to our satisfaction) is how to evaluate work fairly when not all students are on the same level. Students in our program score from the low sixties to mid eighties on the Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency. Naturally, the 101 student is less likely than the 104 student to have work accepted for publication. The solution to this problem has been to divide the papers by levels and select the best from each.

A more serious problem was that of "making the rich richer." In other words, the writing that was chosen for publication was frequently that of students who would most likely succeed in writing class anyway, without the extra benefits of having their work published. The only apparent solution to this problem is to encourage students—especially struggling students—to make the effort and write for *The ELI Expositor*. Concerned teachers have assisted a great deal

by making special attempts to help floundering students get something published. Some teachers have even made submissions to the *Expositor* a mandatory class assignment.

Once the essays had been selected, they were returned to their student authors to make any corrections that the evaluator, their teachers, and they themselves deemed necessary. (Care must be exercised so that reader's suggestions do not dominate or overpower the student's original work. We have found it best to limit suggested revisions to grammatical problems. This is primarily done to insure that the student's writing is exactly that—the student's!)

When students returned the reivsed work we asked for their signatures (in non-Roman alphabets when applicable) to place at the end of their writing. This addition helped to make a normally dull page of print quite attractive.

The revised writing was then typed into columns and proofread one last time. A critical point that needs to be remembered is that students look to the work published in the *Expositor* as exemplary; care should be taken to make it such, including using the best quality of duplication the budget will allow. The finished product should reflect the time and effort that have been spent on it.

Ed. Note: In the next issue of the TESL Reporter, *Evans and Whittaker will report on student and teacher reactions to* The ELI Expositor.

References

Plimpton, George, ed. 1965. *Writers at work: the "Paris Review" interviews* (second series). New York: Viking.

Singer, Isaac Bashevis. 1968. Interview in the *Paris Review* (spring).