

# Will Publishing ESL Students' Writing Keep Them from Perishing?

by Norman W. Evans and Priscilla F. Whittaker

In the previous issue of the *TESL Reporter* various reasons were given for "publishing" ESL students' writing. Procedures and problems encountered in creating a periodic ESL student publication were also discussed at length. In this final portion of our discussion, reactions to *The ELI Expositor* will be reviewed.

## General Reactions

Reactions to *The ELI Expositor* have generally been positive and supportive. First, there has been positive feedback from teachers of other writing-skills classes at the university. Freshman composition instructors have commented that printing the best of student writing is a motivating factor for the students. It lets them see what they are competing against within and among their own classes, and also lets them share and gather ideas from one another and observe how to organize those ideas. Another instructor added that printing international students' writing is an opportune means of exchanging not only ideas for writing, but also information about students' diverse cultural backgrounds. Foreign students are naturally curious about each others' cultures, and exchanging such information can often help students from different backgrounds understand and feel more at ease with each other as they work together toward common goals in their classes.

A second positive reaction to *The ELI Expositor* has been that some students have begun submitting extra work in hopes of getting something "published." They have sometimes done so upon becoming interested in what another student has written in the *Expositor*. Thus, on occasion, they have written letters responding to previously published compositions, particularly those with controversial subject matter. One student with an especially original idea submitted a piece of fine poetry.

A third general response to *The ELI Expositor* that indicates the value which students place on the publication is their requesting copies. Some students ask for extra copies of the current issue; others inquire eagerly when the next issue will be out. Even some non-ELI students request copies of *The ELI Expositor*. A recent case in point was that of a non-ELI student worker at the campus print shop. Having become deeply engrossed in the first page of the latest issue (as the other copies were coming out of the copy machine), he eventually made an extra copy for himself.

A fourth favorable reaction has been the rise in students' confidence in the quality of writing appearing in the *Expositor*. When the first issues appeared, students wondered if they could fully rely on their peers' writing as worthy examples of correct grammar, accurate punctuation, proper organization, etc. But when word began circulating about the many hours of revision often required of the students whose writing was to appear in the *Expositor*, students' confidence in and estimation of the "publication" began to grow. Recently as one student was submitting the third or fourth revision of an accepted *Expositor* composition together with his signature, a peer curiously asked, "What are you doing?" With an unmistakable air of pride, the student responded, "I am writing for *The ELI Expositor*."

## Student Responses to a Survey

In an effort to determine how students regard the *Expositor*, a survey of their feelings toward the publication was conducted. In part, it consisted of questions (with positive/neutral/negative multiple-choice options) such as "What is your opinion of *The ELI Expositor*?" and "Do you think printing the *Expositor* is a good idea?" The anonymously-given responses of 143 students were a heavy 92% positive, with

7% of the responses indifferent, and .8% negative.

Although only a select portion of our ELI students' writing is printed in *The ELI Expositor*, copies of the publication are made available for all ELI students to read. To assess students' opinions as readers, the following questions were asked: "How often do you read *The ELI Expositor*?" (always/sometimes/never) and "I (enjoy all of/enjoy some of/am dissatisfied with all of) the subject matter/topics of the essays in *The ELI Expositor*." Notably, more than two-thirds of the responses were neutral (68%); approximately one-third, completely positive (31%); and only 1%, totally negative. In other words, these responses indicate that nearly every student in our program was participating as an audience of other students' writing, and most were enjoying the writing.

While students' participation as a reading audience is important, their willingness to participate as writers is essential. The responses to the question "I honestly (would like/don't care whether/do not want) my compositions (are) entered in the *Expositor*" helped us understand the extent to which students were willing to "publish" their work. Sixty-four percent admitted that they would like their writing in the *Expositor*; a shy or apathetic twenty-seven percent "did not care"; and for presently only surmised reasons, (lack of confidence, wariness, the personal quality of their writing), nine percent expressly did not want their compositions entered. Nevertheless, it seems the majority not only did not mind but actually even wished for an extended audience with whom they could communicate and who would appreciate the results of their efforts.

Interspersed among the multiple-choice questions were six open-ended questions. Again anonymously, the students were free to respond with any answer, positive or negative, which they deemed closest to their true personal opinions. Since the students' relatively unaltered expressions shed the most light on their attitudes toward "publishing" their own writing, we have listed the open-ended questions below. Each is followed by the students' various free (both

positive and negative together) responses in arranged order from those most frequently expressed to those that occurred more rarely. On occasion, when a given response very closely approximated another in meaning, those similar responses were combined.

Question: Why do/don't you read *The ELI Expositor*?

to compare my writing with that of others  
forget/lazy/no time  
to improve my writing  
to read the writing of a friend  
to learn about other cultures

Question: Do you think printing the *Expositor* is a good idea? (yes/no) Why or why not?

encouraging  
helps me improve my essays  
can know others' thoughts  
gives me good examples  
to share cultures  
wastes time  
rewards us  
can see my improvements  
shows what ELI is all about

Question: Why would/wouldn't you want your writing published in the *Expositor*?

ashamed of my writing  
to show off/for honor  
to share  
encouraging  
gives me confidence  
for comparison  
too personal  
helps others learn

Question: What do you like most about *The ELI Expositor*?

shared cultures  
the styles of writing  
easy to read  
signatures/friends' names

Question: What would you like to see changed in the *Expositor*?

nothing  
more articles/pages  
comments/corrections  
poetry/riddles/cartoons/pictures  
more creativity/variety

teacher's/famous person's essays  
weekly publication

Question: What is your opinion of *The ELI Expositor*? (good/bad) Why?

motivates/stimulates  
to learn/gives good ideas  
challenging/an opportunity  
shows my improvement  
helps students

These student responses apparently support the previously-mentioned notions that a student publication may, indeed, be a beneficial venture in one or more of the following ways:

1. It can provide a source of ideas for one's own writing.
2. It is a means of sharing cultures or of finding an audience to perhaps "show off" to.
3. It offers writing examples that are both "good" and "easy to read."
4. It provides a means of comparing one's own writing with that of one's peers.
5. It is motivating.
6. It gives positive reinforcement and builds students' confidence.

(Compare with "Rationale" pp. 55-56 in the July issue of the *TESL Reporter*.)

Additionally, some students who (as pointed out earlier) had expressed unwillingness to submit *Expositor* entries clearly offered their reasons in this open-response section of the survey: "ashamed of my writing" or "too personal." Nevertheless, we may assume that if the writing of those same shy students had actually been revised and printed--with their permission, of course--their subsequent reply might have matched that of their colleagues: "gives me confidence."

Under "suggestions for changing the *Expositor*," some students indicated "more articles or pages," or more frequent publication, thus attesting to the publication's popularity. Noteworthy also are the wishes for comments and corrections or for essays written by teachers or other writers of esteem. These suggestions together seem to underscore the original purpose of *The ELI*

*Expositor* as well as the basic needs of the students. That is, such a publication of student writing not only provides the necessary encouragement and confidence (that what or how they are writing is correct) needed by most writers, ESL or otherwise, but it also provides the ideas and examples necessary to build upon in creating compositions of thoughtful content and quality.

### Conclusion

The question "Will Publishing ESL Students' Writing Keep Them from Perishing?" necessarily remains rhetorical. With varying individual student needs and personalities, "publishing" may not be the answer to every ESL writing student's needs. However, as the above discussion of students' reactions indicates, publishing does seem to motivate certain students to write. And, equally as important, they do this writing not just for the sake of an "A" or to "pass an ELI class," but to communicate to a given audience--a more real-to-life purpose. Other students, it seems, have benefited simply as an audience, by gathering ideas from the *Expositor*. To still others, the publication has been an instructive experience in the revision process required in producing "publishable" material. Finally, *The Expositor* seems to be an answer to two basic needs of every writer: (1) encouragement, and (2) a source of good, yet unintimidating examples of quality writing.

Thus, in spite of the extra amount of time and effort required by the periodic printing of *The ELI Expositor*, the rewards and positive feedback seem to greatly outweigh any negative reaction or extra trouble. And while the *Expositor* may not be a "cure-all" for the less likely to succeed, nor the magic formula to reduce the time required for exiting from ESL writing classes, the motivating factors and "idea bank" of a publication such as *The ELI Expositor* may, indeed, be enough to keep some floundering writing students from totally "perishing" in an ESL writing program.

Ed. Note: Copies of the informal survey and/or *The ELI Expositor* are available from the authors upon request.