

# Teaching Editing Skills Through Student Monitoring

by Jeffrey Butler

A common problem for ESL writing students at BYU—HC is learning to edit, or polish, their final drafts. Year in and year out, students learn to write complicated English sentences, develop coherent paragraphs, and create well organized papers, only to flaw the final product with poor editing. In other words, they learn skills of significant linguistic sophistication but receive failing marks because they have not adequately learned paralinguistic skills of less sophistication. At BYU—HC, a school strongly committed to predetermined minimum standards of achievement for classroom credit, this means that poor editors are frequently required to repeat ESL writing classes.

Aside from the obvious individual and institutional problems associated with recycling these students, our instructors have faced the pedagogical problem of adding the teaching of editing skills to courses already overloaded with important content material. In addition, it is clear that detecting one's own writing mistakes is no small task, even for native English speakers, let alone ESL students.

How then have we solved the problem? We haven't, fully, but we're trying something called phased monitoring which demonstrates great potential.

As soon as students have been taught the essentials (found in basic grammar texts) in their writing classes, students are formed into small groups of four and asked to meet twice weekly with their teacher. Group members are each requested to write one essay per week and are required to bring the original and three copies to the small group sessions. At these meetings, individuals read their own papers aloud while other group members follow along silently by reading the copies provided them.

At this point, the first monitoring phase, self-monitoring, begins. Each reader

is allowed to change or correct his essay whenever he finds something in his writing which conflicts with his intended meaning or form. These self-identified alterations may range, depending upon individual writers, from omitted words or non-English word order to misuse of punctuation to indicate partial or full stops.

Not only does the writer monitor himself while reading, but he may also ask group members for solutions to problems within the paper about which he is unsure. In many instances, the writer is a student who has hesitant command of the written form. That is, he has control over certain written constructions but uses others with inconsistency. Therefore, most of the problems he identifies include concepts about which he is not quite sure, but for which he has had partial but limited preparation.

Group members are invited to pool their knowledge to answer the writer's questions but are encouraged not to offer information beyond the scope of that which he asks. When the author has finished altering his paper and asking for group input, the self-monitoring phase is complete.

Before discussing the second phase, a few points are in order. The small group format was adopted because it affords certain advantages. First, the writer has a tangible audience for whom he writes. And like any author, he tries to tailor his writing to them. The fact that an audience is real, not imagined, and are his peers provides him with valuable perspective.

Further, the more a writer reads for his small group, the better they understand his questions and he understands their answers. The language which group members use to explain ideas to him may or may not include the grammatical labels used in the classroom, but it will be couched in terms he understands.

The meeting of small groups twice

weekly is often enough that group members can identify lingering problems which resurface in compositions by the same writer week to week. In many cases, such a realization helps a student face up to recurring problems he otherwise might not have accepted as being chronic. Once he realizes his problems, solutions are often a simple matter of instruction or review.

The second phase of monitoring, group monitoring, is the reverse of the first. One at a time group members identify problems in the paper which were not discussed earlier. The author is allowed to ask questions for the purpose of understanding information given him during this phase, but he cannot defend his choices if he disagrees with some of the feedback. From time to time, feedback given by a group member may be incorrect or simply reflect a matter of personal taste. But the pooled knowledge of the group is seldom wrong. For this reason, group members are allowed to qualify, and occasionally even contradict feedback given by others.

Frequently the information provided by the group shows the author problems in his paper which he had not even recognized as trouble spots. That is, they identify linguistic and paralinguistic blind spots. Again, recognizing these problems becomes an important step toward solving them.

After each group member has responded to the writer, the writer is allowed to defend his choices if he still feels they are viable in the face of feedback to the contrary. Group members may also respond in kind until the dialogue has run its course, at which point phase two, group monitoring, is completed.

Before discussing the final monitoring phase, two issues need to be discussed. The first concerns a writer's attitude toward himself and his work. It is generally understood that believing he has the language resources to accomplish a task is essential to a student's being able to do so. This belief in self might be called linguistic security. The question arises, does the intensive feedback of the monitoring process reduce a writer's linguistic security? The answer to this question is yes and no. Early in the monitoring process it may be

uncomfortable for him to face public scrutiny of his writing. As a support, all group members, including the writer whose work is to be considered, must cite positive examples of the paper's strengths before problems are discussed. So doing creates an atmosphere of acceptance and helps the writer regard his paper as a success in spite of certain limitations it may have.

As time goes on, each group member becomes more and more comfortable with the monitoring process because he has experienced it and it has helped him. Correspondingly, group members learn to sense how much and what kinds of feedback will be received by an author. Thus, small group members become more comfortable and efficient participants over a period of time.

A second question is closely related to the first. Is focusing on problems the best way to teach writing skills? The answer here is no. It is seldom better to learn what

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not to do than it is to learn what to do. In writing, learning how to do something ought to precede identifying how not to do it.

In the monitoring process, it will be recalled, small groups do not meet until a specified time within their writing courses. Presumably a teacher would have taught some editing lessons before small groups are formed. Therefore, the feedback members receive reinforces concepts they have been taught. Thus, although they have not yet mastered editing skills, the monitoring feedback is not entirely foreign to them. In this way monitoring becomes an alternative method of reteaching concepts in an actual, as opposed to a theoretical, writing situation.

The final phase, teacher monitoring,

involves the course instructor who, to this point, has been a silent member of the group. Each writer rewrites his paper to his own satisfaction, integrating or ignoring group feedback as he wishes. These papers are given to the teacher who reads them and responds to each writer during short individual meetings.

A well-trained teacher will generally know what suggestions to offer about a paper even if he does not know the writer. But unless he knows something about what has been taught to a writer, he may not know how to say it. For this reason the teacher has been a silent observer of the small group. Doing so has given him a context in which to respond. Thus, the teacher will know which teaching alternative to suggest, ranging from individual study to additional class instruction. And when the teacher and student are satisfied that editing skills have been sufficiently taught, this final monitoring phase is complete.

One alternative to the use of moni-

toring as outlined so far occurs when students repeat the writing course. In most instances, these students need more experience with the small group and less in the classroom. Consequently, small groups composed of repeating students meet three or more times each week and require group members to write an essay for presentation at each session. This flexibility in the overall mix of classroom and small group sessions allows a teacher to personalize the teaching programs offered to his students. Not only do students avoid a certain amount of redundancy which accompanies retaking a class, but they spend their time efficiently by focusing on areas in which they are not yet fully competent.

As noted earlier, the uses of monitoring at BYU-HC are evolving gradually. And while it may not be a panacea for the task of teaching editing skills, it has been useful in making students better editors of their own writing.