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AUTHOR	Jones, Nathan B.
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ABSTRACT

Responds to Tony Silva's 1997 article, which asserted that English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) writing teachers should prevent themes and topics from dominating or controlling the curriculum. This paper argues that it is sometimes helpful for writing teachers to control why and what students write, focusing on university-level English writing in general, and English-as-a- Foreign-Language (EFL) writing in particular. It examines arguments by Jones (1998a) that using teacher-assigned course themes and specific writing topics can help teach students about the processes and conventions of writing academic papers. Jones notes that assigning themes and topics can help motivate students to want to write well. According to Jones, teacher-assigned themes and topics may better help students prepare for the reality of writing academic papers for other classes, and it may also greatly reduce problems with plagiarism. The paper addresses Silva's discussion of academic freedom by saying that writing teachers may compel students to complete assignments they choose as long as they are convinced they are achieving course goals and acting reasonably in students best interests. Finally, it discusses how to cooperatively select themes and topics. (Contains 45 references.) (SM)

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Why Assign Themes and Topics to Teach Writing? A Reply to Tony Silva

Nathan B. Jones
Department of Foreign Languages & Literature
National Tsing Hua University
Hsin Chu, Taiwan

Njones@mx.nthu.edu.tw

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Why Assign Themes and Topics to Teach Writing? A Reply to Tony Silva

Do I as a writing teacher have a right to assign to my students their topics for papers or even the content themes for a writing course?

Although at first glance it might seem obvious that writing teachers should be able to assign specific paper topics and course themes to their writing students, this has become a controversial issue recently. Within the context of an article entitled "On the Ethical Treatment of ESL Writers," Professor Tony Silva (1997) asserted that writing teachers should prevent themes and topics from dominating or controlling the curriculum. With a broad sweep, he identified a wide range of topics and themes that he considers inappropriate as the primary focus of a writing class:

> Third, those who deal with ESL writers must provide appropriate instruction, which, in my view, should explicitly recognize students as intelligent human beings and unique individuals with their own views and agendas and their own interesting stories to tell, not as blank slates for teachers to inscribe their opinions on nor buckets to be filled with their teachers' worldly wisdom. Furthermore, ESL writers should not be subjected to bait-and-switch scams. If they enroll in courses with titles like Introductory Writing or Freshman Composition, I believe it is certainly reasonable for them to expect and to get courses that focus primarily if not exclusively on writing, as opposed to such interesting and important yet inappropriate topics such as peace education, conflict resolution, environmental concerns, political issues, particular ideologies, literature, critical thinking, cultural studies, or some other cause celebre du jour, and use writing merely as an add-on or reinforcement activity. I am not suggesting here that teachers conceal their personal interests or political views from their students—this is unrealistic and perhaps impossible. I am suggesting that these interests and views should neither control nor become the curriculum. (p. 361)

His ethical advice is for writing teachers to focus on teaching students about "rhetorical, linguistic, conventional, and strategic issues about the distinct nature of writing in an L2 and its implications for these issues" (p. 361). He continues, "I suggest that students be given control of the why and the what of writing and that teachers focus on the how, where, and when, on facilitating rather than controlling students' writing" (p. 362).

In contrast to Silva's (1997) view, I argue in this paper that it is sometimes helpful, perhaps even necessary, for writing teachers to control the *why* and *what* of their students' writing. I am not suggesting that all students in all places should always be denied all opportunities to develop their own themes and topics; instead, my point is that teachers who do choose to make extensive use of teacher-assigned themes and topics may have legitimate, practical, and ethical reasons.

My intent is to critique the views of this topic recently expressed by Professor Silva. Because he is a renowned scholar of considerable influence upon the teaching of second language writing and has been serving as co-editor of the prestigious *Journal of Second Language Writing* for several years, his published opinions are important. For these reasons, his words invite scrutiny and, whenever appropriate, vigorous challenge. Hence, it is in the spirit of academic scrutiny and debate that I pen this paper.

I would also like to point out that my discussion will focus on the teaching of university-level English writing in general, and EFL/ESL writing in particular. Some may choose to distinguish between the teaching of EFL and ESL writing by geographic context. Writes Silva (1998), "I think it is made clear in the title and my first sentence of my piece that I meant to address only *ESL* writers, specifically ESL writers in colleges and universities in North America" (p. 342). Others have observed that such simple distinctions between the terms *EFL* and *ESL* are highly problematic (Nayar, 1997).

My own daily classroom experience in Taiwan informs me that the boundaries between EFL and ESL teaching—just like the borders between many nations and cultures—are often flimsy and porous. In my advanced writing classes in Taiwan, I teach students who have learned English in Taiwan only, while many others have learned it in multi-lingual environments in Taiwan, in North America, and in other parts of the world. I even have some who could be classified as native speakers of English, Taiwanese people who hold dual citizenships and have learned English as young children for several years in predominantly English-speaking countries.

This difficulty in maintaining viable distinctions between the terms *second* and *foreign* language teaching appears even to be reflected in the research presented by prestigious academic journals. According to Santos (2000), between 1992 to 1998, only two of 84 articles published in the *Journal of Second Language Writing* "focused specifically and exclusively on permanent-resident ESL students" (p. 9).

Hence, in my view it is appropriate, even essential, to reflect these practical realities by referring to the teaching of EFL and ESL academic writing, especially in my own advanced writing classes in Taiwan, as essentially the same activity.

Teaches the Process of Writing

Jones (1998a) argues that using teacher-assigned comprehensive course themes and specific writing topics could assist in teaching students about the processes and the conventions of writing an academic paper. The idea here is that having an entire class share the same theme or topic would provide a common experience for the group, a point of departure that all would share. As students would share reading materials and participate in discussions and debates about the theme or topic, they would develop their own reasoned views, which would help them in the drafting and revising of their papers.

Silva (1998) offers a curious response. He points out that Jones (1998a) offers no evidence to show that the use of comprehensive themes and writing topics can assist in teaching students about the processes of writing academic papers. Yet in an earlier article, Silva (1993) actually *recommends* for teachers to consider using "a set of assignments that look at one (student-chosen) theme or topic area from a variety of perspectives, thereby allowing students to build syntactic and lexical repertoire in this area through repeated use" (p. 671). Unfortunately, Silva offers no explanation for his apparent change of view. Are we to assume from his words that looking at one theme or topic from a variety of perspectives would somehow be less appropriate now for developing students' language skills than it was in 1993?

Silva does remain consistent in his support of student choice in the selection of themes and topics. However, applying Silva's (1993, 1997) advice to let students select their own course themes and writing assignments, a writing teacher with a class of 25 students could wind up with as many as 25 different individually selected course themes, one for each student. This would certainly give students freedom of choice and power to act in behalf of their own interests, but I believe that a course theme shared by all still has its own inherent value, even if it were to be assigned by the teacher. Of course, one might argue that students could be encouraged to develop their own course theme for various assignments in a writing class. This idea is democratic and appealing. But in a class of 25 students, how likely is it that they would all agree to accept on their own a particular theme for everyone to share? And in how many classes would there be such amazing unanimity?

If the writing students were to work independently on their own separate themes and topics within the same course, it would likely become more difficult for them to work together as a community of writers, a group of knowledgeable peers. In Bruffee's (1984) words, "A community of knowledgeable peers is a group of people who accept, and whose work is guided by, the same paradigms and the same code of values and assumptions" (p. 642). Without a shared course theme, students might lack helpful expertise and understanding about the content of each other's paper topics, making it more difficult for them to respond to the development of interpretations and ideas during collaborative writing activities, such as peer reviews.

Peer reviews are valuable activities in EFL/ESL writing classes. Evidence suggests that, whenever possible, peers try hard to provide helpful suggestions for the development of ideas within papers (Berg, 1999; De Guerrero & Villamil, 1994;. Lockhart & Ng, 1996). There is some evidence suggesting that students of non-Western socio-cultural groups may not work well within peer reviews (Carson & Nelson, 1996; Nelson & Carson, 1998). Yet several other studies involving Asian-born students report that peers generally enjoy and value peer review sessions (Jacobs, Curtis, Braine, & Huang, 1998; Roskams, 1999; Tang & Tithecott, 1999).

To prepare students to get the most benefit out of peer review, how much expertise of the subject matter and the contents of papers should they be expected to share? Some researchers find that lacking shared knowledge of the paper's topic might force writers to explain their ideas more clearly for the non-expert readers (Berg, 1999; Mendonca & Johnson, 1994; Tang & Tithecott, 1999). Nevertheless, Mendonca & Johnson (1994) note that some students of their study actually preferred to be reviewed by peers of the same academic discipline, because of concerns about expertise in responding to the contents of papers.

This desire to have a knowledgeable, informed audience in peer review sessions is understandable. It recognizes reality within the academic world. In academic writing, authors often draft papers for well-informed readers who are intent upon evaluating the effectiveness of support within arguments (Reid & Kroll, 1995). Hence, it seems very reasonable to me to ask student writers to learn how to write academic papers by having them write for readers (peers) who share background knowledge about the contents of papers. How would this be possible if, for example, 25 undergraduates in a research writing class were to pursue 25 very different course themes and write 25 different research papers on 25 different topics?

Evidence suggests that content-based instruction focusing on a common course theme can be a very effective method to improve EFL/ESL reading and writing skills. In a longitudinal study based upon an experimental design, Kasper (1997) found that students in her content-based, theme-focused ESL reading and writing sections out-performed the students of other sections of the same course on standard reading and writing assessments. Moreover, the benefits of the content-based writing instruction appeared to be long lasting. The students who completed the content-based sections continued to out-perform their ESL peers in other ESL skill courses. Kasper even found that students who had completed the content-based writing sections were more likely to graduate than their peers who were enrolled in other writing sections.

Motivates Students

In the second part of his article, Jones (1998a) writes that assigning themes and topics could help to motivate students to want to write well. He argues that students often do not like being in a writing class and that there is no evidence in Silva's (1998) article to show that giving them choice in selecting their own paper topics would help them to enjoy it more. Moreover, Jones (1998a) argues that giving students a lot of freedom in selecting paper topics can be counter-productive, as the freedom could lead to confusion and frustration among those who may need more guidance and direction. Jones (1998a) also maintains that assigning themes and topics for a writing class is an important responsibility of a writing teacher.

Silva (1998) supports an important premise of Jones' argument here, which is that students often do not like taking writing courses. Writes Silva (1998), "It seems reasonable to me to suggest that students often dislike taking college composition classes because they are usually compelled to do so and that forcing topics on them could well compound the problem, adding insult to injury" (p. 346). To the argument that giving students too much freedom of choice in topic selection might be counter-productive for the development of their writing, Silva responds by pointing out that Jones (1998a) offers no evidence for support and that Jones (1998a) underestimates the abilities of EFL/ESL writers who, Silva (1998) believes, can select their own topics and handle them well. Throughout his rebuttal, Silva (1998) offers no evidence to support his own assertion that allowing students to select their paper topics would be a stronger motivator for them to write than to give them a teacher-assigned writing topic or a course theme.

My hunch is that most experienced writing teachers, including those who may expect students to select their own topics individually, probably control selection of individual paper topics, at least to some extent. For example, if a student were to select as a topic for a research paper Taiwanese History, a writing teacher would probably want to encourage the would-be author to narrow the topic to something manageable. Therefore, the issue becomes less of whether or not teachers should control topic selection and development, but more of how much.

In my teaching of advanced EFL/ESL writing among university students in Taiwan, I have found that asking them to draft an oral history paper of a senior family member or an older friend is an effective method to motivate them to learn how to write (Jones, 1998b). In addition to providing students with a personally relevant, immediate, and specific task, the oral history assignment taps into a powerful cultural value shared by my Taiwanese students, which is their respect for, and their love of, senior family members.

In the semester-long class, we focus on doing family oral histories. This assignment clearly *dominates* and *controls* the curriculum of the course. However, as the students conduct their field interviews, organize their data, draft their papers, revise their drafts, and peer edit each others' work, they also attend to academic writing conventions and learn how to write a research paper that is based upon the collection of primary field data.

Because of the strong oral history theme that requires them to write about a senior family member, their efforts are intense and deeply committed, as reflected in the following student comment, which appeared on a written survey at the end of one of my recent writing classes:

And during the interviews with my families, I heard stories of my grandmother that made me moved and shocked. In that minute of time, I realized the relationship between me and my family had changed subtlely. I found the intimacy between us, and I found most of us have the same essence in our blood that makes us have a similar characteristic. This discovery drove me to write the oral history as well as I could. This writing became not *just a exercise in composition class, but it became a very important document—to me and my family.*

A skeptic might argue that the teaching of oral history in EFL/ESL writing classes might be a quaint idea, but that it would probably be inappropriate for students studying in the sciences. Writes Silva (1998), "...how would writing oral family histories prepare students to write in, say, a physics or biology class?" (p. 349). Allow me to respond.

First, it is very patronizing to assume that just because students might be majoring in natural sciences or applied sciences that it would be inappropriate for them to learn to write an oral history, especially of a beloved family member or older friend. Likewise, it might be very appropriate, interesting, and helpful for students in the sciences to write oral histories about the careers of senior engineers and scientists.

Second, a student majoring in engineering or natural sciences who writes an oral history would learn some basic, valuable, and transferable skills, such as how to organize a research project, how to collect data systematically, how to examine data for patterns, how to present the data and the research findings in writing, and how to revise the paper multiple times, making it focused and coherent. These kinds of skills, in one form or another, are important for completing nearly any sort of important academic paper (Spack, 1985, 1988).

Third, it is also a good idea to teach students how to write papers outside of their major fields. Undergraduates of every major field must complete general university course requirements, which often involve some academic writing. The writing assignments in non-major courses can be especially challenging. In a survey of EFL/ESL students attending content courses in an American university, Kroll (1979) found that 54% reported having to write term papers. In the same study, Kroll (1979) found that writing term papers far-removed from their major fields were the most difficult for the students.

Once again, my purpose is not to suggest that using oral history to teach writing is *the* best method for every teacher. Rather, my point is simply that writing teachers, after careful study of, and reflection about, their local classroom situations should have the freedom to develop challenging, interesting, and appropriate themes and topics for their own students.

Prepares Students

In the third part of his article, Jones (1998a) claims that teacher-assigned themes and topics may better help students to prepare for the reality of writing academic papers for other professors in other classes. Citing Reid (1989), he points out that in academic writing, "the purpose of a writing assignment is usually designed, assigned, and evaluated by the audience (the professor)" (p. 220).

In his reply, Silva (1998) questions how teaching writing students to write oral histories would help to prepare them for writing papers in a physics or a biology class. He appeared at one point to agree with Reid's (1989) statement of how the purpose of academic writing assignments are usually "designed, assigned, and evaluated by the audience (the professor)" (p. 220). Silva (1998) writes, "Although this statement [by Reid] may be accurate in many cases, in my view, the assignment of purpose does not entail the assignment of a topic or a theme. I see no difficulty in assigning a purpose, for example, persuasion, in a course where students choose their own topics" (Silva, 1998, p. 349).

For my part, I would like to affirm that Silva is entitled to hold his own views about the meaning of the word *purpose* or the value of teacher-assigned themes and topics. That is his right. But Reid's (1989) original point should not be distorted. Her point is that in academic writing, the audience often designs and assigns the writing task. The audience also evaluates the quality of the written response to the task. For support on this point, Reid (1989) quotes in the same paragraph L1 writing scholar Donald Murray, who writes: "...in the abnormal situation of school, the [writer] is rarely an authority...usually the student writes on a subject and in a voice and form of the reader's choosing" (cited in Reid, p. 220).

Regarding Jones' point that giving students complete freedom to choose their own themes and topics in a writing class might be poor preparation for other classes in which they would be expected to write on a specific topic supplied by the teacher, Silva (1998) responds that this is not so:

> This assertion seems extremely unlikely to me and rather condescending toward students. I find it hard to believe that if asked to write on a specific topic in, say, a psychology class, students who had been given the opportunity to choose their own topics in a composition class would ignore the psychology teacher's wishes" (p. 349).

I have some doubts about Silva's above-mentioned claim. Correctly interpreting and following the terms of a writing prompt is an important and a challenging task for EFL/ESL students. Leki and Carson (1994) discovered that 91% of 77 respondents in their survey of EFL/ESL students enrolled in university-level content courses reported that figuring out the assignment of a teacher was one of the most-important things that they learned how to do in their English writing classes. Yet not everyone apparently learns this lesson well. As in the case of "Luc," (Johns, 1991), some EFL/ESL students at the university level may often fail in trying to interpret correctly writing prompts, causing them considerable grief. Other EFL/ESL writers may understand prompts, but simply choose to resist the teacher's demands. Writes Leki (1995), "When the participants in this study resisted the demands of the assignment, they did so consciously because they recognized that they could not or did not want to do the assignment as they knew the professor intended" (p. 255).

Although the students in Leki's (1995) case study apparently found resistance to the terms of a teacher's assignment to have been a useful strategy, she also points out that it is one "fraught with dangers" (p. 258). Along these lines, Johns (1986) reports in her survey of tertiary-level faculty that failure to follow directions of an assignment was often cited as an annoying feature of students' writing. In several studies of university-level writing assignments given by faculty who teach various content courses with EFL/ESL students, it is apparent that faculty carefully controlled the topics and the contents of the assignment (Braine, 1989; Canseco & Byrd, 1989; Horowitz, 1986, 1989).

These findings have important pedagogical implications. As a writing teacher who regularly assigns general course themes and specific paper topics, I believe that I am being responsible by spending considerable time each term working with EFL/ESL students in learning how to interpret and how to implement carefully the requirements of an assignment.

Prevents Plagiarism

According to Jones (1998a), another reason for a writing teacher to assign themes and topics for students is that it may greatly reduce problems with plagiarism. He claims that writing students who work cooperatively on paper topics and course themes selected by writing teachers would share more opportunities to help each other in developing the contents of papers, reducing the need or temptation to plagiarize papers. Silva (1998) apparently disagrees that plagiarism is an important or a common problem in the teaching of EFL/ESL writing. Writes Silva (1998), "I do not see plagiarism (however one may define this controversial notion) as a 'constant threat.' In my experience with ESL writers, plagiarism is a not a [sic] very common occurrence" (p. 349).

My hunch is that many others involved in the teaching and learning of writing must also be wrestling with the plagiarism problem (Crowe, 1992; Cubbison, 1993; Currie, 1998; Liu, 1993, Moder & Halleck, 1995; Pennycock, 1996; Thompson & Williams, 1995). It must be a common problem because, as Moore (1988) points out, an entire industry has emerged that supports it. Term paper companies advertise ready-made and custom-made papers for university students. According to a spokesperson of one of the larger term paper companies, Research Assistance of Los Angeles, roughly 80% of its business comes from foreign (ESL) students (Moore, 1988, p. A36).

The internet has expanded business opportunities for those who sell products and services to help students to complete writing assignments. Typically, term-paper companies on the web have several hundred titles of papers readily available for immediate purchase by credit card, plus the option of ordering a custom-made paper on a special topic of the shopper's choice. As one might expect, some companies appear to cater to ESL students on their web site promotions.

Several scholars have pointed out that cultural differences concerning the perceptions of text and idea ownership probably explain the causes of many plagiarism problems among EFL/ESL students (Currie, 1998; Moder & Halleck, 1995; Pennycock, 1996). Although we should always respect the cultural values of our students, we as writing teachers must balance this by vigorously encouraging them to do their own writing. We must teach them how to identify and how to avoid plagiarism problems. We cannot ignore the problem, as the stakes for our students are simply too high.

There are many practical steps that we can take to help our students to avoid problems with plagiarism. I have found that teacher control of the topics about which students write may even help to eliminate it. For example, it is very difficult for students to plagiarize an oral history paper about a family member (Cubbison, 1993). The research procedures involve audio-taping interviews and submitting the tapes to the teacher along with rough drafts and final drafts of papers (Jones, 1998b). Throughout the research and writing processes, the students work as a class in small groups to help each other by giving advice as they become very familiar with the development of each other's work.

Using this approach, I am confident that I have not received a single plagiarized term paper in my advanced writing classes for the past 5 years.

Respects Academic Freedom

I would like to begin this section by presenting the following question that was posed by Silva (1998) near the end of his article:

> Would it not be hypocritical for me as an ESL writing teacher and scholar to compel students to write on topics that I choose when I (rightly, I believe) guard so fervently my academic freedom, one part of which is being able to choose what I want to study and write about? (p. 351)

Before I attempt to answer this question, I would like to discuss briefly the concept of academic freedom, especially in its American context. Although the context is limited, I suspect that much of what I write about in this section may also apply to teachers in other countries as well.

Academic freedom is both a pedagogical and a legal term. As Kaplin (1989) points out, it describes "the legal rights and responsibilities of the teaching profession" (p. 180). Writing in the context of American higher education, Lucas (1994) maintains that it has gradually evolved to include a professor's freedom to teach, to conduct research, to publish ideas, and to exercise basic civil rights. Prior to the 20th century, there was very little academic freedom in the United States, as professors were often fired for expressing their opinions about religious, social, political, and economic issues. Many professors eventually united in 1915 to form the American Association of University Professors (A.A.U.P.), whose mission was to fight for the principles of academic freedom and tenure for faculty.

Within the context of teaching students and giving them writing assignments, U.S. federal court has supported the rights of faculty to exercise reasonable control vis-a-vis students over the curriculum and course content. This is illustrated in the 1995 case of *Settle vs. Dickson County School Board,* in which the Sixth Circuit Court of the United States Court of Appeals ruled that a public school teacher was within her right to fail a student who had refused to follow instructions concerning the selection of an appropriate research paper topic. Although the court noted that students have the right to express their opinions about academic issues, it found that their rights of expression are bound by the limitations contained within a teacher's assignment.

The court's decision appears to reflect a general consensus in the American academic community concerning the professional relationships between students and teachers in the classroom. Whereas students have the right to discuss, question, advocate, and criticize ideas freely (as do faculty) they are still expected to learn what a teacher requires in a course. This sentiment is reflected in the following passage of the *Joint Statement on Rights and Freedoms of Students,* which is supported by the A.A.U.P.:

> Students should be free to take reasoned exception to the data or views offered in any course of study and to reserve judgment about matters of opinion, but they are responsible for learning the content of any course of study for which they are enrolled (in Mullendore, 1992, pp. 14-15).

Now I would like to rephrase and then offer a reply to Silva's (1998) question: *Would it be hypocritical for us as writing teachers and scholars to compel students to write on topics that we choose to assign when we guard so fervently our academic freedom, one part of which is being able to choose what we want to study and write about?* By now I think that the answer is clear. We as writing teachers may compel students to complete the assignments we choose as long as we are convinced that we are achieving the goals of the course and are acting reasonably in the best interests of the students' academic learning. This is not being hypocritical. It is being professional and responsible.

Discovering Themes and Topics

Although writing teachers have the right and (I believe) the responsibility to select themes and topics for the class, the selection process can be a cooperative effort. Certainly teachers and students share a common desire to have an interesting, enjoyable, and challenging class.

An excellent way to begin is to apply some action research to investigate systematically the academic needs and interests of the students. As McNiff (1988) explains, *action research* is systematic inquiry conducted by classroom teachers to explore their own practice, "to be critical of that practice, and to be prepared to change it" (p. 4). An action researcher will follow a cycle of steps in the research process, including observation of the situation, reflection about the meaning of events and discoveries, planning to improve the situation, and action to implement the plan. The cycle continues until the problem has been solved or at least improved.

In order to select a challenging and meaningful topic or theme for a writing class, the teacher could begin the term by collecting information from the students about what they would like to read, write, and discuss during the term. Keeping in mind the need to balance the needs of the course with the interests of the students, the teacher might later propose an edited list of potential topics, inviting students to select one as a general theme for the course. I have learned that student input may be gathered through a variety of means, such as written surveys or class discussions conducted at the beginning of the term. Another way is to survey the students at the end of the term about what they would recommend to make the course better for the next term's students. Including a specific question asking students to recommend a future theme or topic for the course might be very helpful.

Although the teacher could work with the students to develop a new course theme for each section of a writing class, I have found that this is generally unnecessary. An interesting and challenging theme that develops in one section of a class could be assigned in others, as long as most of the students and the teacher continue to find it valuable.

Conclusion

The study of ethics is an examination of oughtness, of right and wrong, of good and bad (Shaw, 1996). The issue of how to *ethically* treat EFL/ESL writers is an important and sensitive one, because it proposes a moral decision of how we as teachers should teach our students. In order to develop an ethical system or a code of conduct, it is essential to begin by identifying important principles that are strong enough to withstand professional scrutiny. Ideally, these should be principles that most of us who actually teach in our complex field would be willing to embrace. For the reasons that I have presented here, Silva's (1997) conception of appropriate instruction is a weak pillar upon which to build an ethical system or code of conduct for teaching EFL/ESL writing. A more workable approach might be for classroom teachers to apply action research to explore ways in which to deliver appropriate instruction within their various local contexts. From this acknowledgment of the local diversity within the broader field of EFL/ESL writing might emerge many ethical systems, each based upon a solid and responsible understanding of local learning and teaching contexts. This is my hope.

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