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GRANT ECKSTEIN
University of California, Davis

The Interaction of Theory, Philosophy, and Practice in ESL Writing Conferences

TESOL theory is intended to inform teacher practice, but studying what teachers actually do in a given teaching context can sometimes lead to better theory. This report illustrates an area in which practice informed theory in the context of 1-on-1 writing conferences for prematriculated ESL writers. This report describes the creation and implementation of a writing conference program for 250 prematriculated students at an Intensive English Program (IEP) with language proficiencies ranging from high-beginning to low-advanced. The theory-driven philosophy of conferencing encouraged teachers to meet 1-on-1 with their writing students 5 times during a semester to provide holistic, nondirective, level-appropriate feedback on student writing and to de-emphasize grammar instruction in these interactions. While teachers largely followed this philosophical direction, they also made modifications that were not entirely expected. Specifically, teacher practice deviated from conferencing philosophy in terms of the purposes of conferences, the role of grammar feedback, and the use of reflective practices to shape classroom instruction. Confronting these unexpected areas of teacher practice to learn from them rather than remove them allowed the writing conference program to thrive. It also pointed to areas where the writing conference philosophy, and its theoretical underpinnings, could be reevaluated to become more descriptive and inclusive of actual practice. This report also provides insights other theorists and practitioners may find valuable in establishing their own writing conference programs.

Introduction

After finishing my MA degree in TESOL, I took a faculty position in the Linguistics and English Language Department at Brigham Young University as the writing coordinator for the university's Intensive English Program (IEP). My first major administrative assignment was to create a writing conference program (WCP) for the IEP's 250 students in which every writing teacher would meet with his or her students in face-to-face writing conferences 5 times per semester. Creating this program was a major undertaking

requiring a broad infrastructure that included a training approach, a program philosophy drawing on current TESOL theories of conferencing, and a commitment from teachers and students to balance the needs and expectations of students, teachers, and administrators.

Ultimately the WCP was a success, though teacher practice did not always reflect the theory and philosophy on which the WCP was based. This report focuses on how the theory-driven conferencing philosophy was translated into actual practice and how that practice in turn reinformed the theory. Specifically, this report looks at:

1. How teachers implemented the writing conference program;
2. How this implementation aligned with the theory-driven WCP philosophy; and
3. How this relationship between practice and philosophy informed writing conference theory.

Studies such as this, which investigate areas of theory-practice alignment, can ideally lead to better TESOL theory, practice, and teacher training. And while the purpose of this report is to investigate areas of theory-practice alignment in order to improve TESOL theory and practice, TESOL administrators also may be interested in the design and development of an intensive WCP for its own sake.

Writing Conference History and Background: A Rationale

While classroom-based writing conferences are a relatively new response technique for second language writers, they have been a part of composition instruction for more than 100 years (Lerner, 2005). They were introduced in the 1890s (Baldwin, 1894) and by the 1920s were widely used in American universities (Beck, 1929; Shipherd, 1926). Their implementation was not altogether uncritical, and practitioners have commented on the disadvantages of conferences, namely that they benefit the strong and the weak, but not average, writers, yet it is generally the perfunctory students with few writing needs who actually meet with their teachers (CCC, 1958; Hiatt, 1975). Even with these criticisms, by the late 1970s theorists had developed a "conferencing method" in which students met regularly one-on-one with an instructor in lieu of attending composition classes (Fassler, 1978; Murray, 1979). In 1985, Zamel was among the first to recommend using writing conferences in ESL classes. Her rationale was that teachers could gain insights into the meaning of otherwise confusing student texts and better encourage students to revise; at the same time, students could get a glimpse into the reader's reaction to their writing.

From an institutional perspective, the IEP administration viewed a formalized WCP as a way to capture these benefits and to address several administrative concerns. First, the WCP would help reduce the demand for one-on-one tutoring from its overburdened, IEP-specific writing center by redirecting many of the conferences back to the teachers who gave the original writing assignments. Second, it hoped the WCP's use of an oral and interactive response

mode and a 20% increase in compensation for the additional conferencing time would make writing instruction more palatable to nervous or anxious teachers and make the writing class positions easier to fill in part by easing the overall response workload of writing teachers. Last, the IEP doubled as a lab school for MA TESOL students, so requiring teachers to use writing conferences as an additional response mode was thought to be good teacher training.

With the potential benefits came some practical concerns with the logistics of the WCP, such as how many conferences to hold each semester, the purpose of each conference, the ideal length of conferences, where and when they should be held, teacher training, and how teachers and students would feel about mandatory writing conferences. Many of these additional concerns were addressed by administrative mandates and practical constraints such as office space, teacher contract hours, and measures taken to increase teacher and student buy-in of conferencing.

The Writing Program Philosophy

A WCP philosophy was created that drew on TESOL theory, which in this case refers to philosophical and pedagogic recommendations for effective writing conferences. The philosophy encouraged teachers to offer holistic and global feedback in a nondirective way (Ferris, Pezone, Tade, & Tinti, 1997; Thonus, 2004; Williams, 2004; Williams & Severino, 2004), though teachers were expected to take into consideration the level of abstraction that could be communicated based on student language proficiency. The philosophy also advised teachers to address grammar issues briefly if students were determined to cover this, though it emphasized that teachers should move away from editing or grammar correction as quickly as possible in a conference (Harris & Silva, 1993; Pennington & Gardner, 2006; Sommers, 2006; Williams & Severino, 2004). Teachers were further encouraged to prepare their students for conferences, set an agenda during the conference, and debrief the experience in a subsequent whole-class discussion, while giving their students authority and autonomy in the conference. For instance, teachers were encouraged to have students come to the conference with questions and take a dominant role in the conference dialogue, to determine what to write down, and to summarize their plans for revision (Black, 1998; Pathhey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997; Thonus, 2003). Also, the philosophy subtly reinforced the idea that teachers should not assume the existence of an ideal text (Brannon & Knoblauch, 1982; Reid, 1994), but rather help students progress from wherever they were as writers. Teachers were also given the flexibility to determine what worked best for their students because strict adherence to a philosophy may not always ensure effective teacher practice (Ferris, et al., 1997).

The Writing Conference Program

The WCP required teachers to attend two training meetings; hold five conference sessions—the first and last being "goal" conferences, and the three intermediate being "paper" conferences—with each student each semester; record student attendance at conferences; and discuss their impressions and

difficulties with each other. Each of the conference sessions had an average of 15 students scheduled 10 to 15 minutes apart, resulting in about 4 hours of conferencing per session for a total of 20 hours of out-of-class conferencing per semester.

Students and Teachers in the Program

The IEP's 250 students were all adult, nonmatriculated ESL learners with an average age of 26 years old and international visa status. Upon admittance to the IEP, students engaged in an extensive battery of placement examinations to place them in one of five proficiency levels from high-beginning to low-advanced. The 14 writing teachers at the IEP were either TESOL graduate students enrolled at the local university, MA TESOL degree holders working on a semester-by-semester contractual basis, or full-time faculty.

Evaluating the Writing Conference Program: Reflective Practice

As part of the WCP, I wanted to ensure that teachers reflected on their conferencing experiences and communicated their thoughts to me through four open-ended questions (see the Appendix) because researchers have suggested that reflection optimizes the value of one-to-one conferences (Ewert, 2009; Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Pathhey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997). In general, reflective practice might include ways that a writing conference affects how a teacher chooses to adjust curricula and instruction such as changing an assignment, providing more scaffolding for learners in the classroom, or adjusting feedback methods (see Moneybun & Hanlon-Baker, 2012). So far, literature on adult ESL writing conferences has not examined what value conferences provide in terms of informing teacher practice, so additional research in this area is needed.

Encouraging the reflective practice of teachers also helped show how the WCP philosophy matched the reality of actual practice, which can cast light on how TESOL theory overlaps with practice. Over 2 semesters, I collected 68 reflection questionnaires, grouped similar comments together, and tallied them. When comments included more than one type of response, I gave it multiple codes, leading to the potential of more comments than participants. The groupings helped me see trends that I could address in teacher-training meetings or with individual teachers. The four questions I hoped to answer were:

1. What are IEP teachers' specific aims in holding one-on-one writing conferences?
2. What are the difficulties of holding one-on-one writing conferences in an IEP?
3. What writing skills do teachers address in one-on-one writing conferences in an IEP?
4. How do one-on-one writing conferences inform classroom practices?

What Are IEP Teachers' Specific Aims in Holding One-on-One Writing Conferences?

The findings from the teacher surveys demonstrate two major themes:

1. Teachers reported following the guiding philosophy established for the WCP; but
2. They used conferences for more than just setting/evaluating goals and discussing student writing and occasionally varied from the recommended practice.

This combination suggests that TESOL theory does indeed inform practice, but conferencing practice can reflexively inform TESOL theory by explaining what teachers do beyond the expectations of standard conferencing.

The teachers' reflections showed that they followed the WCP guiding philosophy. For example, teachers reported using conferences primarily to discuss student writing or teacher feedback. Additionally, teachers demonstrated a strong emphasis on student-centered interaction by addressing students' questions about their writing, addressing students' general writing concerns, discussing the writing portfolio, and offering praise or encouragement, which allowed teachers to tailor their writing instruction to the individual learner needs. This fits into writing conference theory because conferences are exceptional formats for individual attention.

In addition to meeting the standards set forth by the WCP philosophy, teachers used the writing conferences for additional purposes, such as using conferences to build rapport and to get to know students better, help students predraft using an outline, and get student feedback on the class. Teachers also discussed students' overall learning goals and students' writing-curriculum goals. It is interesting to note the distinction that teachers discussed students' *general* learning goals in writing conferences, not just *writing* goals, making writing conferences a valuable tool for student learning beyond just writing development.

The teacher reflections also revealed where the teachers' practice both differed from writing conference theory and confirmed it. The WCP philosophy encouraged teachers to use the writing conferences as nonthreatening, collaborative exchanges to avoid the asymmetry inherent to writing conferences, an interaction in which teachers have more authority (Black, 1998). However, some teachers perpetuated the asymmetric power dynamic by using writing conferences to assess student language proficiency, review grades, and discuss the role of the teacher. Though discussing these things can be a positive experience, doing so underscores the authority of the teacher in relation to the student and confirms research about power dynamics.

In all, the teacher reflections demonstrate that writing conferences served a multiplicity of purposes beyond just discussing a student text. This suggests that it is worthwhile to question the traditional roles of writing conferences and determining how a few minutes of one-on-one time with a student can lead to better student writers, better student-teacher relationships, and better insights into the effectiveness of classroom instruction. This is one way that TESOL conferencing theory could be expanded based on the actual practice of teachers.

What Are the Difficulties of Holding One-on-One Writing Conferences in an IEP?

The teacher reflections revealed some difficulties with implementing writing conferences. The biggest difficulty of the WCP as reported by teachers was scheduling conferences, which included dealing with absent students—an expected outcome considering teachers were asked to hold writing conferences outside of class time. Some researchers note that *in-class* writing conferences can be an effective way to address these concerns (Ferris & Hedgecock, 2005). Additional difficulties included handling unprepared students, interacting with unmotivated or negative students, and feeling as if students were not implementing teacher feedback. Surprisingly, only two teachers reported conferences to be too time consuming or tiring because this was expected to be a common complaint.

An interesting note is that although writing conferences indeed consume out-of-class time, they can also limit it. A conference that is scheduled for just 15 minutes, for instance, generally cannot go much over time when other students are in the hall and there is a schedule to keep, whereas marginal comments and endnotes can often take much more than 15 minutes per paper. Of course teachers who conferenced were encouraged to read through and be familiar with a paper before meeting with a student, but they were advised against marking it up with any detail before meeting with students. This combined procedure was presented to and used by teachers as a tool for reducing or at least capping response time.

While the above difficulties were reported, when the number of teacher complaints was compared with the number of positive responses, the positive responses outweighed the negative by 3 to 1. This ratio seems to indicate that teachers viewed conferences more positively than negatively, an observation similar to that found in Moneybun & Hanlon-Baker (2012). An interpretation of this ratio and the specific difficulties mentioned seems to suggest that the WCP did fulfill its purpose of easing the overall workload of writing teachers, that conferences genuinely were worth the investment in time and extra compensation, and that teachers valued writing conferences.

What Writing Skills Do Teachers Address in One-on-One Writing Conferences in an IEP?

Teachers reported that they mainly covered higher-order concerns in the writing conferences, and the most discussed concerns were paper organization and topic invention, while only a few teachers reported covering grammar issues in the conferences. This lower priority on grammar is to be expected considering teachers were asked to privilege higher-order concerns such as content and organization over lower-order concerns such as grammar, punctuation, and spelling. However, it is critical to note that some teachers actually did focus on grammar, as this indicates that some of the teachers thought that grammar instruction does have a legitimate place in an ESL writing conference program.[1] This is an area where TESOL theory and practice align yet contrast with *mainstream* conferencing theory in that TESOL theory and practice is more geared to language instruction than mainstream theory.

How Do One-on-One Writing Conferences Inform Classroom Practices?

Through the process of gathering and analyzing teacher responses, I saw how conference sessions influenced the teachers' teaching. More than half of the comments indicated that the conference helped teachers better know *what* to teach in class. A number of teachers, for instance, said they would alter their upcoming lesson plans to include discussions on topic sentences, organization, or even typing speed because of their conferencing sessions. One teacher wrote, "When I saw consistent concerns or errors in their writing, I could discuss it … with the class as a whole." Teachers also reported that through the writing conferences they got insights into *how* to better teach their writing courses—or more precisely what to *reteach* in a novel way. For instance, another teacher wrote, "When I could see that [my students] didn't understand the topic or the assignment, I could plan a new approach to present it again."

Other responses included five comments wherein teachers expected to adjust their course to better suit student study purposes, such as a stronger focus on preparing for standardized language exams; and two teachers reported that the conference session informed them of class pacing issues, while one teacher found that the conferences better informed her of the proficiency level of her students.

The importance of this reflective practice is that it provides some insights into how a student-centered activity (such as conferencing) can give back to the classroom. Composition teachers often encourage their students to reflect on their writing (Giles, 2010), and it makes sense to ask teachers to do their own reflecting. This is an area where TESOL practice might benefit from the application of composition theory.

Additional Teacher Feedback on the WCP and Subsequent Adjustments

Teachers also reported feedback on the WCP in general. Nearly half of all the responses indicated that the WCP was a positive experience that teachers found rejuvenating. This is in contrast to just three responses wherein teachers said the conference program was a negative experience. Seven responses indicated that shorter conferences, 10 minutes or shorter, were just as effective as longer, 15-minute conferences. Only one teacher expressed the opposite, stating that conferences should be longer. Five individuals agreed that there were too many rounds of conferences; they recommended that just three rounds would be adequate—one for each of the three required multidraft essays. Additional comments spoke to administrative suggestions and other observations. Suggestions included increasing teacher salary and holding more training meetings. Other observations included that conferencing in the morning before class (rather than afterward) reduced overall conferencing fatigue, that students were open about their concerns and willing to talk them over during the conference, that goal conferences were easier than paper conferences, and that higher-proficiency students seemed less likely to attend conferences. This may be due to the fact that in this IEP, higher-proficiency learners regularly score well on the TOEFL and get accepted into a local university, which often leads to student attrition.

Based on these suggestions, I used actual teacher experience to inform and refine the WCP program. For instance, I gave teachers more freedom to hold shorter conferences and more freedom in using conferences to do more than just set writing goals and review student writing, though these were still expectations. I particularly wanted to encourage teachers to get beneficial feedback for themselves and their class through conferencing with students, including knowing what things to teach in class. I also added additional training regarding asymmetrical power dynamics in conferencing to help teachers consider different conferencing techniques. Obviously power relations cannot always be leveled, especially for introverted students, those with limited oral proficiency (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990), or those with social, cultural, educational, or rhetorical expectations or preferences that may be at odds with Western academic practices (Hyland & Hyland, 2006; Pathhey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997; Strauss & Xiang, 2006). But making teachers aware of these various assumptions and expectations can at least help them act with more sensitivity to power relations in a conference.

Lessons Learned: Practice Informing Theory

This investigation was primarily a teacher-reflection exercise that I used to adjust the WCP during its 1st year of implementation. Nevertheless, the above analysis gave me valuable insights into the way teachers conferenced with students and aided open communication between the teachers and me. While the WCP worked much the way it was intended and teachers largely followed the writing conference philosophy, there were some areas of practical insight that could inform writing conference theory. They are discussed in the following sections.

Conference Purposes

In traditional writing conferences, the teacher and student focus together on the student's writing to motivate discussion and revision, but my observations in this WCP suggest that writing conferences can address more than just writing. Teachers used writing conferences for a variety of other purposes, including building relationships and rapport, setting goals (both general and writing specific), providing one-on-one instruction, gaining insights into classroom instruction, obtaining student feedback on the class, conducting assessments, and distributing grades. This observation of practice speaks to the multiple purposes of conferences and illustrates factors that might feasibly affect their success in helping students revise their texts. For instance, students who developed a rapport with their teacher may have been more willing to interact and negotiate in a conference and ultimately construct better text revisions. This might also be true of students whose feedback on the class was sought in a conference, or students who were motivated by goal setting or learning their precise standing in class in regard to grades. The WCP philosophy had not anticipated these extra purposes, but seeing them in practice suggests that they should be considered and studied from a theoretical perspective and perhaps fostered in conferencing practice because, ultimately, writing conferences may

be more about individualized attention with a teacher rather than just writing instruction. This is something that TESOL theory did not seem to predict and may be an area for future investigation.

Higher-Order Concerns Versus Lower-Order Concerns

Based on teacher reflections, I judged that writing conferences could be a productive venue for individualized grammar instruction (Harris & Silva, 1993). As such, I encouraged teachers to attend to student grammar needs if students brought them up. This follows more recent developments in writing center theory and practice in which tutors are encouraged to provide content and grammar feedback simultaneously or in the opposite order (Blau, Hall, & Sparks, 2002; Cogie, 2006; Taylor, 2007) and to also provide lexical assistance in addition to content and grammar feedback (Nakamaru, 2010; Severino & Deifell, 2011). This advice complicates the prototypical writing center philosophy that emphasizes higher-order concerns above—or to the exclusion of—grammar instruction. But ESL students often crave grammar feedback, and at an IEP where grammar is a major focus of study, it made sense to adjust practice toward more grammar instruction. After all, not addressing at least salient grammar issues at this level might be a missed opportunity, and some language concerns may be best addressed in conferences.

Conference Practice Informing Classroom Content

Per the reflective observations, teachers noted that writing conferences helped them know what to teach (or reteach) in class, and in some cases helped them think of better ways to teach it. Obviously teachers have a plan to cover certain material when beginning a course, but in this case the conferences seemed to provide clarity and helped direct the selection of topics. Additionally, conferences helped teachers recognize topics that needed to be retaught because of student weaknesses in these areas. In a sense, conferences provided a venue for teachers to assess student learning and conduct a miniature needs analysis. In the metaphor of revision, a writing conference can help a student revise his or her text while helping a teacher to revise his or her course. In this sense, teachers can make use of reflection, or the "process of thinking about what [one] is doing while in the process of that doing" (Yancey & Smith, 2000), to improve their teaching. That teachers reflected on their course while conferencing suggests that a philosophy of conferencing that focuses primarily on student writing improvement may fail to account for more subtle programmatic benefits of conferencing, such as how conferencing can inform teaching.

Conclusions

Ultimately, the WCP was developed to satisfy a number of institutional goals and was built on a philosophy informed by writing conference theory. By following the philosophy, teachers would meet individually with students 5 times a semester to provide holistic, nondirective, level-appropriate feedback on student writing while de-emphasizing grammar instruction. As it was implemented, teachers largely fulfilled this expectation, but they also made modi-

fications that were not anticipated. Instead of sanitizing the program by weeding out areas in which actual teacher practice contrasted with the theory-driven philosophy, I used the teachers' adaptations to help steer the program. Of course, I provided training and standardization, but by listening to the teachers and respecting their practical observations, I allowed the program to successfully respond to student, teacher, and administrative needs and expectations. Furthermore, the open communication between teachers and the administration led to a WCP that was informed both by theory and by teacher practice. An analysis revealed that there are some areas in which the teachers' practices warranted revisiting the WCP philosophy, such as broadening the purposes of conferences, allowing for more grammar instruction, and capitalizing on teachers' conference reflections. A revision of philosophy, by extension, necessitates a reevaluation of the existing theory that drove the philosophy.

Even though supervisors may have a strong sense of good TESOL practice or theory, which may even be reflected in a specific philosophy, teacher experiences are still valid and can help steer a program. And because TESOL theory and practice overlap but may not always be in alignment, studying what teachers do can help illuminate areas of theory-practice mismatch and lead to better teacher training, practice, and theory. After all, TESOL theory is a moving target: It moves as theorists *and* practitioners scrutinize areas where theory and practice converge and diverge.

My personal story of creating a writing conference program ends here, but I am hopeful it can transfer to other contexts and inspire TESOL professionals elsewhere. Obviously my context had a number of advantages, such as small classes, resources for increased compensation for writing teachers, institutional support for the program, teacher-training opportunities, and well-educated teachers in the TESOL field. But other contexts with fewer resources might still benefit from the things I learned by creating and implementing this program, including the value of open and structured communication between the supervisor and teachers, some of the additional uses of writing conferences, the potential for grammar feedback in conferences, and the value of reflective practice while teaching.

Author

Grant Eckstein is pursuing his PhD at the University of California, Davis, where he is studying Linguistics with an emphasis in Writing, Rhetoric, and Composition. He earned his MA in TESOL at Brigham Young University, where he held a temporary full-time position after graduation. He has taught writing and composition classes at the IEP and university levels for the past 8 years.

Note

[1]Other findings from this study reported in Eckstein (2012) showed that lower-proficiency students received more grammar feedback than their higher-proficiency counterparts, suggesting that as ESL students became more proficient, teachers responded with more global feedback. It should also be noted that teacher self-reports on feedback practices do not necessarily align with actual

practice; see Montgomery and Baker (2007) for a discussion of this issue at the IEP under study.

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Appendix
Teacher Questionnaire (From Original Study)
Conference Reflection

1 What were some positive outcomes of this conference session?

2 What were some difficulties that emerged in this conference session?

3 What specific ways (if any) will this conference session influence your teaching this semester?

4 What feedback, positive or negative, would you like the ELC administration (and potentially other teachers) to hear following this conference session?