Balancing Content and Form in the Writing Workshop

ROM handbooks and grammar drills to hands-off writing workshops. From a focus on forms and mechanics to a focus on content and meaning. From written product to writing process. From teacher-directed classrooms to student-centered learning. It seems that in the past several decades, in mainstream English language arts and English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms alike, the pendulum of language pedagogy has swung from one extreme to another. For much of the 1950s and 1960s, language study centered around traditional grammar and translation drills. In the 1970s and 1980s, grammar was pushed to the margins, so that communication could take center stage.

These large swings of the pendulum are inevitable—in order to effect change in language learning, teachers had to develop approaches that were radically different. But, as Nancie Atwell points out, the danger in such large swings of the pendulum is that we risk trading in one set of orthodoxies for another. In our efforts to promote more content-centered pedagogy, we had to paint grammar in the most negative light possible, and in doing so, we lost sight of what was valuable about studying it (Kolln). We forgot how much grammar and other forms contribute to meaning, how much they aid communication. We went from giving students one lopsided version of language to giving them another.

It's important that we bring the swing of that mythical pendulum back to the center. It's important that we aim for a more balanced approach, one that seeks mastery of both content and form, requires attention to both process and product, and succeeds with the active engagement of both student and teacher. Why? Because adolescents and adults in the process of learning academic English need both content and form. They need access to a well-rounded version of English.

This more balanced approach is beneficial for all students, because all adolescents need to develop their linguistic repertoires so that they're comfortable with informal, spoken home discourse and formal, written school discourse. If they want a chance at success in today's society, all students must learn to shift easily from “home talk” to “school talk” to “workplace talk” whenever the situation arises. But a balanced approach is especially beneficial to language minority students whose home dialect or home language is not Standard American English, and who struggle in school as a result (Baugh; Hagemann). For mainstream speakers of Standard English and for avid readers, learning “school talk” is relatively easy because it overlaps a great deal with their “home talk” or with the version of English they absorb from texts. But for language minority students and for nonreaders, learning “school talk” is a monumental task. Whether they're speakers of a vernacular variety of English, bilingual speakers of English and another language, or simply students not used to seeing print versions of English, these students must learn “school talk” as a second language or a second dialect. We can support these students with a balanced understanding of English form and content.
More and more, second language teachers are adopting a pedagogy that balances form and content, called “focus on form,” with their English language learners (Long and Robinson; Williams). But I use a similar approach in my mainstream basic writing class as well. I’m not advocating a return to teaching discrete elements of grammar. Rather, I’m suggesting that we continue to emphasize the writing process with tasks that encourage genuine communication but strategically interrupt that process to call attention to forms student writers might find useful. At different points in the process I may focus on form on the global level in terms of overall essay structure, on the sentence level in terms of syntax and stylistic devices, or on the word level in terms of grammar and mechanics—never in isolation, but always with the aim of giving students tools to communicate more effectively. These are all forms students might eventually learn on their own, but by calling attention to them, I can speed up the process.

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In this article I describe the “focus on form” approach as well as some typical form-focused lessons I use. But I must first pause to ask whether form—more specifically academic, Standard English form—really matters. In the meaning-centered pedagogy that most of us use, we emphasize fluency and tend not to worry much about form-based elements like spelling, grammar, and punctuation. We assume that students will eventually control those elements once they’re comfortable with the writing process. I agree that most students master many formal elements on their own, but I’m concerned about the ones they don’t master, resulting in errors they can’t see on their own. I also acknowledge that there are many contexts in which academic or Standard English form isn’t appropriate. But I’m concerned about the contexts in which it is. I don’t believe that it’s enough for writers to simply get their points across. They must be able to do so credibly and persuasively. And for many readers, especially those in the business world, that means using conventional grammar. In a recent study, Larry Beason interviewed business people to learn their responses to different kinds of errors. He reported that, although some errors distracted readers more than others, respondents found all errors bothersome. They felt writers who were careless in their writing would be careless in conducting business as well. He concluded that teachers must impress upon student writers that errors matter because they influence how readers view them and what they have to say. Beason’s study tells me that form isn’t an added-on feature of writing, but an integral part of communicating; thus, attention to form belongs in our language arts curriculum.

Writing Workshops and the Natural Approach

The history of English language arts pedagogy in mainstream classrooms parallels that of ESL pedagogy, though perhaps at different times. In the 1980s, the translation exercises and grammar drills common in ESL classrooms gave way to more communicative, “natural” approaches, largely due to the influence of second language acquisition researcher Stephen Krashen. Krashen argued that second languages are learned like first languages: through lots of exposure to language and with a motivation to learn. He pointed out that children acquire their native language by absorbing the rules of the language(s) they hear because they’re highly motivated to communicate with those around them. They develop sophisticated language abilities with virtually no direct instruction. Likewise, he argued, second language teachers should create a positive atmosphere for learning and expose students to a great deal of authentic language, but there’s no need for, or benefit to, direct instruction. Under Krashen’s influence, syllabi structured on the basis of grammatical elements (e.g., present tense before past tense, simple sentences before complex ones) gave way to syllabi based on communication tasks (e.g., how to ask questions, how to tell stories, how to apologize). According to Williams, communication-based language teach-
ing is currently the most common pedagogical approach in ESL classrooms.

Similarly, in mainstream language arts classrooms, instructional time spent on isolated grammar study (e.g., parts of speech, kinds of sentences) gave way to writing workshops where students were given a great deal of freedom to choose their own topics and genres, set their own purposes, and identify their own audiences (Atwell; Weaver). Again, the goal was to create a more holistic, natural environment for learning written language, more like the one that fosters oral language development in babies. Thus, mainstream writing workshops share important characteristics with communicative ESL classrooms. In both kinds of classrooms, teachers

- assume that students learn to write the same way they learn to talk, and they learn a second language the same way they learn a first.
- emphasize tasks that encourage students to express themselves and make meaning, rather than learning the language by memorizing the grammar.
- emphasize taking risks in using language. In order to create this kind of atmosphere, teachers downplay explicit, direct grammar instruction, as well as correcting grammar errors.
- use authentic language models—what “real” speakers say and what “real” writers write, rather than arbitrary handbook rules or stilted textbook dialogues.

These new approaches did much to change students’ experience with language in school. Rather than analyzing it, students were busy applying it, using it to achieve their own purposes.

However, in recent years, ESL teachers have grown increasingly frustrated by Krashen’s “natural approach” and have called for more focus on form in the curriculum. Perhaps the most important reason for their reform is that students don’t make efficient enough—and sufficient enough—progress in learning the grammatical forms and sentence structures of English, in spite of years of exposure to the language (Williams). Studies of communicative classrooms in Canada and elsewhere have shown that when formal instruction and error corrections are downplayed, when students discover they won’t be held accountable for being grammatical, they have little motivation to learn standard grammar. Although they’re fluent in the language and can get their message across, their language is full of grammatical errors. ESL teachers, Williams laments, have sacrificed accuracy for fluency, meaning, and self-esteem. “In focusing exclusively on meaning and the overall success of communication, we have overlooked the issue of accuracy,” she points out (13).

Similarly, it may be difficult to motivate vernacular English speakers and fluent bilingual immigrant students to make the effort to learn and use more Standard English because they can already be understood by English speakers (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes). They may be highly articulate, but their language may diverge significantly from Standard English. Moreover, it may be easier for students to learn Standard English as a second language than it is to learn it as a second dialect because the task of sorting out two languages is easier than the task of sorting out two dialects. Two languages share little in terms of grammar, phonology, and vocabulary, but two dialects of English overlap a great deal. Adolescent vernacular speakers may have a general sense that there’s a difference between their “home talk” and the “school talk” that they’re expected to learn, but they may not notice which specific features are different. Or they may not be aware of when they’ve used language inappropriately for the context. In contrast, the differences between English and another language are generally quite clear.

However, it’s essential for students to sort out the differences if they want to learn Standard English as a second language or dialect. Successful language learners sort their two languages into separate linguistic subsystems and store them at least partially in different places in their brain. With a different mental representation for each system, they draw on either language whenever they wish (Hagemeier; Siegel).

A second reason that more ESL teachers are calling for an increased focus on form is that communicative syllabi may be based on a faulty model of language learning. Psycholinguists aren’t sure to what extent adolescents and adults (especially second language learners) “have access (or complete access) to the same” language learning mechanisms young children use (Ellis, et al. 408). Older learners may have to rely more on general learning strategies than on the language faculties many believe are hardwired into infant brains. Because they may not learn languages as “naturally” as once believed, adolescents and adults would no doubt benefit from
some explicit instruction in grammar and other formal elements (Ellis, et al.).

**A Focus on Form**

A focus on form approach provides that explicit instruction, yet balances it with a concern about content. The curriculum is structured around meaning-centered activities, but work on the tasks is stopped for a few minutes when a focus on language would facilitate students’ abilities to communicate. Teachers intervene to “draw learners’ attention to or provide opportunities for them to practice specific linguistic features” (Ellis, et al. 407). Focus on form lessons can be preemptive—the teacher can say in essence, “You’re likely to have trouble with this, so let’s look at it first”—or reactive—“I can see you’re struggling with this as you draft or revise; here’s a suggestion about what to do.” This approach doesn’t represent a return to isolated grammar drills. Rather, it encourages direct instruction in some of the key language learning strategies that adolescents—especially language minority students—may not be able to use very well on their own. According to Williams, form-focused knowledge enables writers to do the following:

- **notice** salient features in the language around them
- **develop hypotheses** about those salient features—mental pictures, as it were, about what form they take and how and why they’re used
- **monitor and adjust their own language**

Each of these strategies maintains its communicative focus, but it also shows how form can enhance that focus. Writers who are better able to address the needs and expectations of their readers, in part by drawing on formal or grammatical conventions, are more successful communicators.

More importantly, however, each strategy represents an important step in the language learning process. Let’s look at each of these strategies more fully. In order to learn a particular form, students must first notice it (Long and Robinson; Ray). Students may eventually notice and learn a form on their own, but teacher intervention can speed up the learning process by making students aware of a feature that has immediate relevance to the writing task at hand. Teachers can anticipate problems in the writing prompt and call students’ attention to features before they begin to write. Or they can interrupt students in the drafting or revising process to point out a grammatical, syntactic, or semantic element they might find beneficial. Students, too, may interrupt the process to ask for help on a feature.

For example, after a unit on description, a fourth grade teacher asked her students to describe their kitchens. Before they began to write, the teacher called all students’ attention to spelling difficult words they were likely to use, such as *refrigerator*. She wrote these words on the board so students could look at them if they needed to as they were writing. Then, as she moved around the writing workshop, she was stopped by one of her Spanish-speaking students. He wasn’t sure how to spell the word *cabinets* (a word that wasn’t on the board) because he confused *b’s* and *v’s*. In Spanish, they’re pronounced essentially the same, and he couldn’t remember which letter he needed in English, so he asked for help. Since his attention and interest were focused on an aspect of spelling he was struggling to master, the teacher was willing to sacrifice some of his drafting fluency for a spelling minilesson.

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Second, students must understand the feature, by developing a theory about how it works to promote the meaning they want to convey and in what contexts it works most effectively (Long and Robinson; Ray). In order to facilitate understanding, the teacher directs students’ attention to the connection between meaning and form and to the particular rhetorical and stylistic effects achieved by using that element. Ray says she wants her students to see that writing is a process of making decisions about what they want to say and about how they can shape their ideas to achieve their goals and meet their readers’ needs.

For example, an eighth grade teacher noticed a sentence fragment in the draft of a movie review of Little Women. The student had written, “Jo is my favorite character. She’s like me. Always writing.” The teacher admired the effective use of a deliberate fragment, but she was also a little bit leery of unconventional punctuation. She decided to praise the student and show her how to use dashes, because a dash would work equally well in this context. Both the fragment and the dash cause the reader to pause and to emphasize the writer’s main point, which appears in that final phrase: namely, that the two have in common an obsession with writing.

Another technique teachers can use to help students understand a feature is to compare it to information or texts students already know or to various uses of the same strategy (Ray; Siegel). For example, in a twelfth grade creative writing class just after Labor Day, the teacher brought in a newspaper feature that used a variety of ways to list items just after Labor Day, the teacher brought in a newspaper model above, to add a connecting word to convey a sense of plenty, so we chose, like the newspaper model above, to add a connecting word between the items in our list: I couldn’t resist digging into the bowl of M & M's: the reds and greens and yellows and browns and blues, and the new purples called out to be eaten. Do we in fact convey a sense of abundance? Does our list serve the needs of our readers? Have we used appropriate grammatical forms?

This strategy requires us to distance ourselves from our text enough to see it critically, to see it as our readers would. The goal in making this critical judgment is to create what writing researcher Linda Flower calls reader-based prose. This kind of text both expresses a writer’s ideas and meets a reader’s needs. It typically starts out as writer-based prose, as a record of the writer’s thoughts that only the writer can easily understand. Good writers work to transform—to organize and develop—this string of ideas into a text that’s meaningful to a reader as well.

Beginning writers often have a difficult time identifying gaps in their text, so at first they need the feedback of readers to give them a sense that their writing choices were credible and persuasive. This feedback helps them develop an ability to monitor and adjust their own language (Williams).

Given what we know about how languages/dialects are learned, pedagogical approaches that encourage language minority students—indeed all students—to notice, understand, compare, test out, and integrate new formal features into their writing facilitate their overall success in learning “school
talk." Here are some of the ways I use this kind of approach with my students, many of whom are in my basic writing classes because they're language minority students.

**Reading for Overall Structure**

I adapt Ray's "reading like a writer" approach to help students analyze and learn from student models I hand out when I give a major writing assignment. I always include models because I want to assure students that they can do the assignment, even though it's challenging, and that they can take any number of approaches to it. One semester, I handed out an analysis assignment to my basic writers: they were to use the ideas in the text to analyze an experience of their own. I could see immediately the overwhelmed look on their faces, so I quickly handed out several papers from students who had done the same assignment the year before. Together, we read and discussed the content of the papers, and then we turned our attention to their structure. How had last year's students approached the writing task? How had they structured their essays?

To help students focus their attention on the structure of the essays, I showed them how to do a do/say outline. It's a technique I learned from my own teachers to help me revise my drafts, but I've discovered it's a useful prewriting technique as well. Students can use it to analyze model essays, and, for example, to discover which parts they need to generate for their own essay. In a do/say outline, students read each paragraph and write down what it says—that is, they briefly summarize its contents—and what it does—that is, they identify its purpose (e.g., to introduce, to conclude, to give background information).

By the end of the period, we had several outlines on the board representing the structure of the various model papers. We also talked about why the authors had chosen these overall structures and why they were effective. Finally, the students began to relax. "You mean," asked a skeptical James—a student who hid out in the far corner and hadn't voluntarily said anything in class before—"that's all we have to do? That's what this assignment is?" "Well," I said, "you don't have to do it exactly like these different authors did, but they did write successful papers." "Oh," he said, "I can do that!" echoing the thoughts of his classmates as they filed out the door. Sure enough, when they came to class the next day, James and most of his classmates had strong first drafts.

The assignment was to interpret a reading, and I had already emphasized the intellectual move of analyzing difficult texts in several write-to-learn activities. At the same time, taking time to scrutinize the form of an analyzing essay opened up several possibilities to my students, who hadn't been able to envision themselves writing the assignment until then.

**Making Form Fit Meaning**

For several weeks one semester, my basic writers had been researching and discussing the problem of violence in the schools, learning from government statistics that the rate of single-victim murders had gone down between 1994 and 1999, but the number of incidents in which there were multiple victims went up (Stevens, et al.). But as the students were writing a position paper recommending ways to make schools safe, they soon discovered they didn't know how to reconcile what seemed to be two conflicting ideas—some aspects of the problem were going away, while others were getting worse, and they wanted school officials to do more. I interrupted their writing so we could discuss how to subordinate one idea to the other, acknowledging one but emphasizing the other. I directed them to places in our source texts where our authors had written similar kinds of sentences, using words like although, even though, and while. I supplied the label subordinating connectors and took a few minutes to explain what they were, why they were useful, and how to punctuate sentences containing them. After this spontaneous minilesson, the students went back to work with a new understanding of sentence structures that enabled them to take a more nuanced stand.

**Focus on Form in Proofreading**

I want my basic writers to concentrate on effectively developing what they want to say in their papers, but I also know that it won't serve them well if I don't call their attention to conventional grammar. So on the first version of papers they hand in, I comment on their content, pointing out places where they can further develop their ideas. In their second version, however, I use the minimal marking technique of underlining words that violate standard grammatical or mechanical conventions. Most of the time, my stu-
dent can “translate” what they’ve written into more conventional forms on their own. All they need is some help in focusing on their language as language. I talk to them individually about whatever errors are left uncorrected (Ferris and Roberts; Haswell).

In the meantime, we talk about why proofreading is so hard to do well. As Madraso says, it’s hard in part because it requires a different kind of reading than the one we typically do. We also practice our editing skills with a modified version of exercises from Vail and Papenfuss’s *Daily Oral Language*, using passages from the students’ papers. At the beginning of class almost every day we look at a passage of two or three sentences. Students can usually identify the mistakes and explain the rule, but not always. It sometimes helps to compare “what you hear people say” to “what you have to write in a formal, school paper.” Sometimes it helps to compare two easily confused grammar elements, such as plurals and possessives. Sometimes, especially with ESL students, it helps to compare how a specific grammatical or mechanical element works in their “home talk” with how it works in “school talk.”

The best writing curriculum for language minority—indeed, all—students is one that balances content and form, that calls for an attention to writing process and to written product, that draws on knowledge from both teacher and student. There’s a need for both form and content in the writing workshop.

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**Works Cited**


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