A discussion of writing trends could begin with an exploration of the cave dwellers’ attempts to document their existence. Were those early pictographs a product of a bottom-up methodology? Were they influenced by regional linguistics? Were they peer edited? No one knows. Perhaps few care. One thing we do know about the beginning of writing was that it had a purpose. People used it to communicate. By its very nature, writing has always been an investigation and representation of the human experience. By writing, we discover not only what but also how we think.

Concerns of English as a second language (ESL) writing teachers may not seem directly connected to pictographs. However, the issues of clarity, coherence, and control have always been integral to communication. Writers, whether holding a flint or a laptop, face daunting challenges when they begin to compose. As F. Scott Fitzgerald noted, “All good writing is swimming under water and holding your breath” (Winokur, 1986, p. 105). Unfortunately, it turns out that writing is much more complicated than not breathing under water. It involves intellect and curiosity, logic and language, structure and soul.

Questions about the complex tasks facing ESL writers and their teachers abound. What is essential for ESL writing students to know? What do ESL teachers need to understand about writing instruction and assessment? What influence, if any, does a first language (L1) have on a second language (L2), and what difference does language choice play in writing? Can technology aid language production? Are writing skills learned sequentially? Can writing be taught? What is good about a good composition? On career surveys, why don’t people ever indicate that they want to become ESL writing teachers? These questions, among a host of others, challenge every conscientious writing instructor.

L2 writing has taken its place as a distinct academic discipline. Since 1992, it has had its own scholarly periodical, *Journal of Second Language Writing*. Even so, the history of ESL writing has not been without controversy. In the mid-20th century, error correction substituted for writing instruction because writing was
viewed largely as practice in producing targeted language patterns. The stimulus for student writing came from genuine texts, usually literature. Writing was seen not as a skill, but rather as an extended linguistic exercise in composing error-free prose. Silva and Matsuda (2001) confirmed the attitude that writing instruction had no independent place in ESL curricula when they asserted that prior to the 1960s, L2 “writing was regarded as but a secondary representation of language” (p. xiv).

However, a schism occurred when some teachers and theorists sought to de-emphasize surface writing elements, such as grammar, structure, spelling, and punctuation, in favor of teaching writing exclusively as a process. While the process and product camps held equally firm convictions about the validity of their respective approaches, various other theories about teaching ESL writing emerged. Along with the new theories came new questions concerning writing topics, academic discourse expectations, contrastive rhetoric, and effective teacher response. The emergence of multiple pedagogies left teachers with confusing assumptions and opposing philosophies, neither of which led to clearly defined instructional practices (Raimes, 1991). In 1993, Silva lamented that there was still “no coherent comprehensive theory of L2 writing” (1993a, p. 668). Azar (2007) argued in the opening plenary of the 2007 annual Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) convention that ESL had entered a postmethods era. How can ESL instructors find their way through the bewildering labyrinth of conflicting theories about language, especially when some educators not only teach multiple sections of unskilled student writers but also oversee lunchrooms, serve on committees, supervise study halls, manage car pools, patrol restrooms, plan the prom, present at conferences, and publish?

The role of writing in teaching English to speakers of other languages is far from clear. For one thing, as Blanton (2002) reports, ESL writing has struggled to find a home. It has been the foster child in English, linguistics, remedial, and developmental studies. It has been sandwiched between swing dance instruction and income tax seminars in nonacademic extension programs. It has been taught in church basements, locker rooms, and coat closets. Should ESL writing belong to composition studies, applied linguistics, foreign language study, bilingual education, or interdisciplinary studies (Matsuda, Canagarajah, Harklau, Hyland, & Warschauer, 2003)? To confuse matters more, Raimes (1991) concluded that shifts in writing pedagogy have produced at least four different academic approaches, each with its own orientation. Traditional rhetoric focuses on form, yet the main concern for the expressionists is the writer. Academic rhetoric centers on content, but the central focus of social constructivism is the reader. In theory, these diverse methods segregate instructional purpose, but in reality, they overlap, which confirms Silva’s (1990) remark that the endless carousel of methodologies makes both ESL writing students and their teachers dizzy. He concluded that the mixing of various theories has resulted in a toxic stew that could potentially poison any agreement on the central issues of the discipline.

As confusing and contradictory as the short history of ESL writing may be, ESL
instructors do not get an excused absence from the fray. Teachers are responsible
for designing a classroom curriculum that is based on sound theory and research.
Instructors should not surrender that core duty to antiquated criteria, nor should
they capitulate to profit-minded publishers. Students deserve course content that
is driven by principled decisions based on professional experience, observation, and
research. Today, instant accessibility of information leaves no shortage of available
literature on ESL writing. Within seconds, a Google search responds with more
than a quarter of a million entries for “ESL writing.” Google Scholar instantly
offers approximately 3.5 million documents on “ESL methodology.” Moreover,
resource-sharing agreements have turned regional libraries into international
research centers. The Online Computer Library Center and Research Librar-
ies Information Center have made digital materials available literally at teachers’
fingertips. It is obvious that comprehensive information about ESL writing is easy
to access. However, even the best search engine cannot reveal whether teachers, by
and large, actually make use of the available data to design their ESL curricula.

This volume of the TESOL Classroom Practice Series began with an invita-
tion for teacher–researchers to share their insights regarding the effectiveness of
current pedagogical theories in the ESL writing classroom. The call intention-
ally allowed for diverse issues, such as placement criteria, course design, writing
tasks, and assessment. It also invited the examination of cultural, social, political,
psychological, and rhetorical issues and expectations that are intertwined in the
writing process. Included in the amalgamation of possible topics for the book was
the influence of each student’s L1, gender, personality type, cultural background,
educational experience, and personal goals. The thoughtful, cogent chapters
gathered in this volume serve to demonstrate how current theory and research
affect the way teachers design curricula, choose writing tasks, assess student
performance, and conduct their own academic inquiries.

The first section of the book, Designing Writing Tasks, focuses on choices the
writers make with rhetorical structures and syntax and the teacher’s need to devise
writing projects that encourage students to generate, arrange, and communicate
ideas effectively. Nigel A. Caplan discusses ESL writing methodology in “Beyond
the Five-Paragraph Essay: A Content-First Approach,” the first chapter in the sec-
tion. He argues that teaching traditional rhetorical patterns or strictly adhering to
the process approach provides ESL students with writing tools that are academi-
cally insubstantial. His research led him to propose sustained-content language
teaching, an approach that balances students’ academic freedom of expression
with accountability for their ideas, logic, and assumptions. Linda Forrester’s
chapter, “Modern Heroes: From Content to Composition via Critical and Cre-
ative Thinking,” promotes comprehensive, content-based ESL integrative learn-
ing, in which thinking is fundamental to writing and, thus, connected to context.
Her chapter explores using a central theme in order to encourage a matrix of
thought and language. Next, Shawna Shapiro’s chapter, “Writing to Embody:
Engaging Students in Written Role Play,” deals with content by introducing
language play in ESL classes as a way to liberate students and their teachers from viewing writing as an isolated skill. Her research reveals that ludic discourse helps learners gain greater fluency and innovation in their L2 by encouraging them to read, interpret, and relate information in both speech and writing. In Chapter 5, Mark A. James explores authentic and purposeful writing assignments in “Using Second Language Learning as Content in a University ESL Writing Course.” He chose content that exposed students to text-centered writing, critical thinking, and reflective response. Because the students were second language learners themselves, they could easily connect their own cultural and linguistic experiences to the academic content. The next chapter, “Meaningful Writing Opportunities in the Community College: The Cultural and Linguistic Autobiography Writing Project,” by Gloria Park, demonstrates a need to connect writing assignments to the multilingual, multinational, and multicultural experiences of ESL students. To ensure that ESL classes are student centered, her curriculum draws from students’ immigrant perspectives. The sequenced autobiography project allows writers to explore their new situations without ignoring their roots. Thus, students’ dual identities are validated, making the connection between life at home and life at school easier. In the last chapter of this section, “Media Participation as an End Point for Authentic Writing and Autonomous Learning,” Stephen Soresi’s research links the need for authentic materials in the receptive skills of reading and listening to the need for authentic end points in the productive skills of writing and speaking. Traditionally, the end point for students’ writing was an unknown, invisible reader. Soresi’s chapter outlines an approach that clarifies the readers’ identity and the writer’s purpose.

In the second section of the book, Focusing on Academic and Professional Writing Skills, Amina M. B. Megheirbi discusses a meaningful academic task in “Multitext Synthesizing in Research Writing.” She states that despite its importance to university-bound students, synthesis writing has received little, if any, attention from the academic community. Even in some strenuously academic ESL writing classes, students continue to narrate their own experiences and ideas, so expecting them to synthesize and restate information from different sources without adequate instruction is unrealistic. A series of miniprojects leads students through investigating a research question, critically reading and linking authentic texts, and producing coherent writing. Miao Yang’s “A Process–Genre Approach to Teaching Writing to Medical Science Graduate Students” originated from her students’ dissatisfaction with both the process and product approaches to writing. Yang’s research resulted in a genre-based approach to writing abstracts, an authentic end point for doctors publishing in academic journals. Teaching students to communicate clearly and appropriately in their professional and academic communities combines the process and genre approaches by adding explicit linguistic information about specific types of writing. The next chapter, “‘It May Be Possible’ to Teach the Use of Hedging in EFL University Writing,” by Jingjing Qin and Erkan Karabacak, addresses the need for instruction in the essential skill
of shading and nuancing language. This chapter suggests that when students are exposed to authentic content, taught in a reasoned sequence, and held accountable for presenting opposing points of view, they gain a heightened sensitivity to hedging. In Chapter 11, “Service Learning and Writing With a Purpose,” Denise Vaughn describes how to engage ESL students in their social communities. By working for approved nonprofit agencies, students have ample opportunity to use their oral and aural skills in practical and meaningful situations, while at the same time learning about career expectations. Additionally, they are required in their writing to analyze, evaluate, and reflect on their service-learning projects. Likewise, Jennifer Haan and Karyn Mallett’s chapter, “From the Classroom to the Boardroom: Grammar and Style Across Genres in ESL Professional Writing,” includes the community-based service-learning project, which pairs ESL students with clients to create promotional materials for actual businesses. To prepare ESL students to join the workforce, the course addresses style and usage suitable for professional writing, including practice in writing proposals, memos, progress reports, promotional documents, usability guides, and PowerPoint presentations. The varied assignments develop an awareness of the purpose, audience, and content of business communication.

The third section of the book, Enhancing Critical Writing Skills, highlights the skills necessary for critical writing. Peter McDonald’s chapter, “Discourse Analysis: Bridging the Gap Between Linguistic Theory and Classroom Practice in Writing Classes,” considers textual awareness and cohesion. This approach teaches students to examine authentic texts using both top-down and bottom-up methods, which provide essential information for detailed analysis of rhetorical patterns. Clarity, coherence, and cohesion are also at the heart of Holli Schaub-ber’s “A Case for Writer-Generated Annotation.” This chapter explains how ESL writers can examine the meaning and purpose of each sentence in relation to its context. By doing so, students recognize global relationships between words in sentences, sentences in paragraphs, and paragraphs in compositions.

No 21st-century discussion of classroom practice can ignore technology, so the fourth section of the book, Utilizing Technology in Writing Curriculum, centers on effective applications of electronic tools. Christopher A. Baldwin’s chapter, “Wiki Writing Web: Development of a Web Site to Improve Writing Motivation in Exam Courses,” encourages the use of technology in peer review and correction, resulting in multileveled collaboration and an increased motivation to produce clear, global communication. In addition, he examines the roles of feedback, error correction, and washback in an L2 writing classroom. “A Chain Story Blog,” by Najla Malaibari, combines creative writing with online supplemental tools, such as images, audio files, and Web site links. This chapter introduces an activity in which students prepare and produce stories in a nonthreatening environment where critical analysis, reflection, and feedback are supported and directed by their peers, their teacher, and the entire Internet community. An added benefit is that publishing the students’ work promotes a
sense of pride and gives writing a purpose beyond the classroom. The final chapter in this section explains how to use the Internet to access real and natural usage in English. Vander Viana’s “Authentic English Through the Computer: Corpora in the ESOL Writing Classroom,” illustrates the advantages of using online corpora tools. Since ESL writers do not have native-speaker intuition or infallible resources to help them choose which words and phrases are commonly or rarely used, corpus-based exercises aid the exploration of vernacular and academic English. Students need to know what combinations of words are meaningful, not merely what word combinations are possible. Viana contends that full mastery of the language centers on choosing precise wording for lucid communication.

Finally, the last section of the book, Re-visioning, Revising, and Editing ESL Compositions, discusses methods for examining and re-examining compositions. Soo Hyon Kim’s chapter, “Revising the Revision Process With Google Docs: A Classroom-Based Study of Second Language Writing,” was a result of integrating a computer-mediated revision approach with an ESL writing curriculum. Kim tracked writing progress as students experienced different kinds of feedback. The study examined the students’ choice of revision tools and the substance of their changes in order to discover which feedback produced the most substantial and positive results. Donald Weasenforth, Margaret Redus, and Nancy Ham Megarity’s chapter, “Great Expectations: Whose Job Is This Anyway?” also deals with editing issues in the ESL writing classroom. Their goal was to encourage student autonomy in proofreading and editing skills by providing sequenced training, effective strategies, and reliable tools. After reviewing writing course syllabi, they discovered that proofreading skills were not specifically mentioned and that editing practice primarily consisted of detecting surface errors. In order to place the responsibility for the final writing product into the hands of their students, they designed a method for teaching writers how to assess their own work.

The classroom practices discussed in this volume reflect various trends and methodologies; however, the underlying theme is the need for clear and meaningful communication between ESL writers and their readers. While approaches differ, two core beliefs are constant: ESL students have something important to say, and ESL writing teachers must help them say it. Effective instruction starts with meaningful writing tasks, integrates a variety of skills and technologies, builds competencies, requires critical thinking, and employs appropriate resources. May this volume of ideas and insights enable ESL teachers to help their writing students find purposeful voices that resonate across countries, customs, disciplines, and cultures.

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