Chapter 1

An Introduction to Dialogue and Second Language Writing

"In the beginning is dialog."
(Roger Shuy, 1987, p. 891)

"Talk is the sea upon which all else floats."
(James Britton, 1970)

The most effective writing classrooms are not always quiet places. Certainly, students may at times be engrossed in individual writing tasks, but at other times the writing class might be mistaken for another kind of classroom altogether. Students may be actively engaged with each other and with their instructor—voices murmuring in conversation, occasionally punctuated with excitement, frustration, or even anger. Or students may be seated in small groups engaged in a joint project, working in pairs on a task, or carrying on a discussion as a whole class with individuals bidding for the instructor's attention. On other occasions, a student may take over the teacher's normal role to make an informal presentation from the front of the class. At these times one might mistake the writing classroom for a conversation course, a public speaking class, or a lecture-discussion class in an academic content area.

What does all this hubbub have to do with writing and, more specifically, with non-native speakers learning to write in their new language? After all, writing, like reading, is an individual, highly demanding cognitive activity requiring the writer's full

attention and concentration. How then does a class that looks and sounds like a social gathering serve as the setting for the development of second language literacy?

This book addresses these questions. It looks at the ways that oral and written language interact for second language (L2) learners, and it describes a general approach to teaching L2 writing that is rooted in **dialogue**—dialogue between students and teacher, between student and tutor, among students, and in the minds of individual student writers (Ellis, 1999; Shuy, 1987). The main arguments to be made here are that writing, although it is most frequently accomplished by individuals working on their own, is a fundamentally social phenomenon and that it can best be acquired by L2 learners when it is embedded in the dialogue of social interaction—that is, when it floats on a sea of talk, to paraphrase James Britton (1970). Certainly, teachers can deal with their L2 students as individual, solitary writers, and there are times in most writing courses when it is necessary to do that. However, teachers also have the option to create within their classrooms a community of writers who, through dialogue, serve each other as tutors, coauthors, sounding boards, and critical readers.

If scholars in the area of L2 writing have tended to neglect the influence of oral language on the development of literacy, it may be a reaction to the short shrift historically given to writing by researchers in second language acquisition (SLA) and applied linguistics in general (Harklau, 2002). This book takes a wider view. It sees the written and oral modalities as inextricably linked developmentally for many learners, and social interaction as a powerful impetus in becoming biliterate.

Four Assumptions

The social context we will examine most closely (though not the only one we will consider) is the writing classroom itself. The argument for using a dialogue approach to teaching L2 writers rests on assumptions similar to those that underlie

communicative language teaching, the movement that has revolutionized foreign and L2 teaching over the last 30 years (Nunan, 1999). It also owes much to more recent interactionist and sociocultural theories of SLA (Ellis, 1999; Hall & Verplaetse, 2000; Hall, Vitanova, & Marchenkova, 2005; Lantolf, 2000). The key assumptions are that:

1. The most effective language lessons are those that are genuinely communicative, meaningful, and relevant to learners.
2. Communicative language use involves people working together to exchange information, negotiate meaning, and accomplish tasks.
3. Classroom language learning is by nature a social enterprise. Thus, interaction is not just a precursor to, or a condition for, language learning—it is in itself a way of learning language.
4. Social interaction provides an ideal context for mastering complex cognitive skills like writing.

  Although the first assumption is usually associated with the communicative approach to teaching oral language, it is also valid when applied to acquiring L2 literacy skills. Take the prescription to make lessons "meaningful," for example; a meaningful speech event implies at least two active interlocutors with something important to talk about. In the same way, a communicative approach to writing implies an interactive, cooperative relationship between the writer and his or her reader. It is by being conscious of their readers that good writers are able to construct texts that anticipate their readers' information needs and possible reactions. Thus, one important benefit of bringing dialogue into the writing class is to help L2 writers develop a strong *sense of audience.*
  The second assumption calls for the use of pair and small group tasks in the writing classroom. In oral language classes, small group activities provide learners with the opportunity to negotiate meaning with each other through conversation. In the writing classroom, brainstorming and revision groups

and one-on-one tutoring help writers to generate and clarify their ideas and to critique their own texts. In dialoging with their teachers and fellow students in class and with tutors in the writing center, apprentice writers learn to recognize the logical gaps, ambiguous references, and fuzzy statements hiding in their texts and how to mend them. They learn, in essence, to make sense on paper. Thus, a second benefit of creating a dialogic environment in the writing class is that it makes available to L2 students alternative strategies for *inventing and revising* the idea content of their writing and for developing written *coherence.*

The third assumption, that classroom language learning is inherently social, implies that injecting dialogue into the writing class is more than a means of livening up the occasional lesson by letting students work together while the teacher enjoys a well-deserved rest. The teacher is an important actor in the social dialogue of the classroom and has an important role to play at all times, not just during whole-group instruction, as will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4. But more important, the third assumption implies that dialogue is itself a general approach to teaching and learning to write in a second language. As such, it can inform all of our instructional decisions—from the ways we introduce our students to unfamiliar written genres, to the way we mark their papers. Thus, a third benefit of the dialogic approach is that it gives us a *consistent basis* for planning and executing writing lessons and for dealing with L2 writers and their texts.

The last assumption captures the notion that social communication is the bedrock on which an individual's literacy skills develop. This is the theoretical basis that underlies much of the discussion in the rest of this book and that will be examined in detail in Chapter 2. It is embodied in the quotation from James Britton (1970) with which this introductory chapter began and that informs Donald Rubin's (1988) extension of Britton's analogy when he makes a case for talk as a key element in learning to be literate: "We internalize talk, and it becomes thought. We externalize talk, and it becomes

our link to social reality. We elaborate talk, and it becomes our bridge to literacy" (p. 3).

As will be shown in Chapter 2, Rubin's claims closely parallel the argument that Lev Vygotsky (1986) and the sociocultural theorists have made to explain the development of L1 literacy in children (Wells, 2000). A similar argument will be made for L2 writers of all ages.

Taken together, these four assumptions suggest that making interactive dialogue a regular feature of the writing classroom is a logical and natural extension of communicative language teaching.

The Plan of This Book

In arguing for a dialogic approach to teaching L2 writers, this book intends to accomplish two goals—first, to provide readers with a theoretical perspective on the importance of talk in L2 learners' development of written language; and second, to explore some specific ways of incorporating social interaction into the writing classroom in ways that support and promote the development of L2 students' written language.[1] The first goal is addressed directly in Chapter 2, which surveys the teaching and learning theories that lie behind the movement to transform the teaching of writing into a social event. To see how these theories play out in the classroom, Chapter 3 takes a close look at the cases of three individual ESL learners, each of whom uses talk differently in the process of acquiring written English.

To address the second goal, Chapters 4, 5, and 6 take a detailed look at the functions of talk in typical instructional environments involving L2 writers. They present specific strategies and techniques for putting dialogue to work in the service of L2 writing development—in the writing classroom (Chapter

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[1]Only in the most rigidly controlled classroom can social interaction be avoided. The question is not one of getting students to talk but of creating an instructional atmosphere and specific tasks that successfully exploit the potential of talk to enhance the development of written language.

4), in the instructor's conference room or the writing center (Chapter 5), and in the written correspondence that passes between teacher and student (Chapter 6). The final chapter considers four critical questions that should be examined by any teacher who considers using the dialogic approach with his or her L2 writers.

The Argument for Dialogue

Douglas Barnes (1990), one of the most eloquent proponents of oral language as an educational tool, has claimed that *talk is a key factor* in all school learning. In a rhetorical question with direct relevance to our present concerns, he asks:

> How is it possible to introduce students to pre-existing systems and at the same time enable them to make independent choices?. . .the interaction between teacher and student through talk must play a central role in the strategies by which teachers seek to reconcile the two horns of the dilemma. (p. 44)

It will be our overall assumption that this dilemma and the response posed by Barnes apply to the teaching of writing (the "pre-existing system" in this case) and the development of individual learners' writing skills (the "independent choices") no less than to other content or skill areas in the school curriculum, and to L2 writers no less than to native speakers.

Whether the reader is a practicing foreign language or ESL teacher, a teacher of general composition, a teacher-in-training, or a teacher educator/researcher, it is hoped that the theoretical claims and practical suggestions made in the following chapters will provide fresh ways of looking at the uses of talk in the writing classroom, at our own social behavior as instructors, and at the nature of the tasks we set for our students as social learners.

In the spirit of James Britton, Douglas Barnes, Donald Rubin, and others, let's proceed on the grounds that by examining the nuts and bolts of social interaction between teachers and learners, we can identify some of the crucial elements involved in successful writing instruction for L2 learners.

Throughout, our general response to the problem of how teachers can best serve the needs of L2 learners in developing their writing skills is to approach the entire enterprise through dialogue.

Discussion Questions

1. An advanced L2 writer once told me, "If I don't talk, I don't learn." What could he have meant? What is your reaction to the claims made by the authors cited in this chapter that dialogue/social interaction lies at the heart of all learning? Is that too categorical a statement?

2. Do you think a writing pedagogy based on the dialogue approach would be suitable for mixed classes of L1 and L2 writers? Why or why not?

3. What dialogic strategies or techniques do you currently include in your own teaching? What made you decide to include these elements?

4. In your own experience, and as best as you can recollect, what role(s), if any, has social interaction played in your development as a writer?

5. What theories of writing/composition are you familiar with that support (or run counter to) the ideas put forward in this chapter?