**Introduction**

*Controversies in Second Language Writing: Dilemmas and Decisions in Research and Instruction* (henceforth *Controversies*) is a book designed to help L2 writing teachers make informed decisions in their writing classes and build a knowledge base for conducting research on L2 writing. It is not a “how-to-teach” book but a book about thinking, reading, and reflecting.

In both the broad field of education and the specific field of second language education, there is great interest in how novice and experienced teachers make decisions in their classrooms. This question can be approached in many ways, and in this book I focus on just one of these: *that of how teachers in L2 writing can be helped to make reasoned decisions by understanding some of the key issues and conflicting opinions about L2 writing research and pedagogy*. By reviewing some of the controversies that have influenced how we conceptualize and teach writing to multilingual learners in school contexts, I hope in this book to help current and future L2 writing teachers make informed decisions in their own ESL/EFL classrooms.

The controversies pertain to both L1 and L2 writing and include questions about the incompatibility of fluency and accuracy, the contrastive rhetoric debate, the process-product debate, ways to assess improvement, the purpose and value of different kinds of feedback and error correction on writing, the argument about the value of explicit teaching of genres versus situated practice, issues of audience and plagiarism, and the dilemma of helping marginalized or disempowered writers accommodate or resist the way language is used in dominant
cultures. Many of these debates among writing scholars remain unresolved or unresolvable. Still, because they deal with issues that L2 writing instructors face on a daily basis, novices as well as seasoned professionals in both foreign and second language settings must act on them in some way. Reviewing the scholarly arguments will help teachers take a reasoned position on them within the realities of their own classrooms and in light of their own underlying beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning. The discussions in this book, in short, are intended to help writing teachers become both more knowledgeable and more reflective about the decisions they make in their teaching as well as more aware of their agency as decision makers in their own settings.

The stance I take in this book is that some of the debates that have characterized our field set up false dichotomies but that they should not be dismissed for this reason. The process-product debate is a clear example of such a false dichotomy that still merits thoughtful discussion by L2 writing teachers. There can be no product without a process for getting there, and there can be no process without some kind of resulting product, even if that product is a shopping list or an application form. Teachers, therefore, in good conscience, cannot ignore either but can choose to focus more on one than the other for pedagogical purposes (or may be forced to do so by curricular mandates) and can help students understand that the two sides of this particular coin cannot be separated. Reviewing this particular debate will also help teachers recognize that other aspects of writing, such as social and political factors, complicate the apparent dichotomy of process and product (see the 2003 special issue of the Journal of Second Language Writing [12(1)], “L2 Writing in the Post-process Era”).

Another example comes from genre studies and contrastive rhetoric. Here arguments persist about whether genres are most usefully seen as primarily formal and textual regularities that are specific to particular cultures or as social and disciplinary phenomena enacted in texts and whether students benefit from explicit teaching of genres as opposed to learning them in situ.
The picture is not black-and-white, nor is the argument fully resolvable, given the legitimacy of multiple views and goals.

A third example of false dichotomies can be seen in the debate between pragmatist and critical approaches to EAP (English for Academic Purposes). This debate pits teachers who believe their main job is to teach L2 students functional writing skills against those who hope to encourage students to develop a critical awareness of the political and ideological aspects of their writing tasks and possibly contribute to social change. Other controversies in the field have been similarly falsely dichotomized, giving novice teachers in particular the message that they should make either-or decisions in their teaching, that clear decisions are in fact possible, and that the latest fad surely must be the best. In this book I hope to counter these misunderstandings, not only through summaries of the key arguments themselves, but also through examples of how teachers have dealt with them in their own classrooms.

A thread running through the entire book, and framing the book in chapter 1, will be that writing teachers benefit from being aware of, and openly discussing with others, the criteria they use to make the countless decisions that they need to make every day in the classroom. The criteria fall into three broad areas: philosophy of teaching and learning; knowledge of relevant issues; and the practical constraints of local teaching and learning settings. These decision-making criteria apply across the board, to ESL, EFL, and FL settings and across the topics I discuss in *Controversies*.

Writing teachers who are new to the field of L2 writing will find this book particularly valuable in that from the first day of class they will be faced with the questions raised in the book in their daily practice of teaching. Although the book does not provide novice teachers with immutable answers, it lays out issues, presents reasoned opinions and guidelines, and poses questions for ongoing discussion and reflection. Seasoned teachers as well will find the discussion and question-oriented approach of the book valuable in that it encourages knowledge building and reflection by all teachers. The presumption
is that teachers’ knowledge changes and grows throughout a career and that ongoing knowledge-based reflection helps prevent teaching practices and attitudes toward teaching from becoming stale and routinized. Debate, controversy, and informed discussion contribute to this growth. Teachers are likewise encouraged to recognize that a book like this can provide only an introduction to key controversies in the field and that to become fully informed about and engaged in the debates, they need to delve into the literature where the issues are discussed in more depth and detail. Reference lists and selected bibliographies of relevant resources are provided at the end of each chapter to encourage teachers to read further.

*Controversies* consists of an introductory chapter and five main chapters, each of which is divided into several sections. The first part of each main chapter begins with thought-provoking quotations from the literature and initial decision-oriented questions for readers to consider, after which an introduction lays out the issues or controversies to be reviewed. The second section, “Discussions in the Literature,” reviews some of the important literature that has addressed the issues, focusing in some depth on the arguments of a few key people. The third section, “Classroom Perspectives,” presents descriptive and research data from the author's classroom experiences or from the classroom research and pedagogy of others. The following short section, “Ongoing Questions,” sums up the ongoing and unresolved issues. A final section, “Beliefs and Practices,” can usefully be used as either a starting or a concluding point for each chapter. This section of direct questions to readers encourages personal reflection on teaching beliefs and practices in the specific contexts of their own teaching and learning. Each chapter is followed by a combined reference list and list of other relevant readings. These resources are provided at the end of each chapter rather than at the end of the book so as to cluster them according to the themes in the chapters. The extensive lists are designed to encourage readers to consult original source readings and to continue their explorations as part of graduate course work, classroom teaching, or research projects in L2 writing.
Chapter 1, “Beliefs and Realities: A Framework for Decision Making,” introduces readers to the roles played in their decision making by a carefully thought-out belief system, in conjunction with a realistic assessment of the practical constraints of local contexts of teaching.

Chapter 2, “Contrastive Rhetoric,” reviews some of the arguments surrounding the contrastive rhetoric field since the appearance of Robert Kaplan’s triggering article in 1966. Some of the arguments involve methodological issues in contrastive rhetoric research, the dangers of cultural stereotyping, and the textual, as opposed to social, focus of the field.

Chapter 3, “Paths to Improvement,” examines only three controversies that concern ways that students might improve their writing. One is the fluency-accuracy dilemma, another is the process-product debate, and the third is the role of response with a particular focus on error correction.

Chapter 4, “Assessment,” reviews some of the difficult issues surrounding the methods and purposes of assessing L2 students’ writing. These issues include questions about objectivity and subjectivity, rater reliability, and ethical dilemmas in assessment.

Chapter 5, “Interaction,” deals with only two controversial issues connected with the concept of interaction in L2 writing practices, those of audience (writers’ interaction with readers) and plagiarism (writers’ interaction with the published words of others).

Finally, chapter 6, “Politics and Ideology,” covers three difficult areas of controversy: the debate in EAP between those favoring accommodationist pragmatism and those favoring critical pedagogy; the cultural politics of critical thinking; and the politics of Internet technology.

Some issues inevitably overlap in different chapters of this book and may be covered more thoroughly in other books in the Michigan Series on Teaching Multilingual Writers, but I see this as a strength rather than a weakness in that it reinforces the idea that L2 writing is a complex interweaving of practices that can be studied at several levels of detail. The book offers readers few solutions and no prescriptions
but draws them into some of the complex issues about which L2 writing teachers need to make decisions every day.

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