Editors’ Note

This issue of The CATESOL Journal once again features a range of articles, exchange ideas and reviews. The area of writing predominates beginning with the Leki and Berger articles, both of which explore the issue of feedback. The CATESOL Exchange features two articles on writing by Poggi and Grant and Caesar. These examine the use of the instructor as a model for writing and the use of student journals as classroom materials. In addition, the review section of the journal features several writing texts as well as a work on coherence.

The remainder of the journal reflects the diverse interests of the CATESOL membership. An article by Andrews examines ESL in the workplace. The article by Herda transports the membership to China. The Devenney article explores wordlists while Lipp promotes the technique of sustained silent reading.

The remaining articles in the CATESOL Exchange by Master and Murray reflect common professional concerns.

Finally, additional book reviews include works that can be used for teacher education.

Dorothy Messerschmitt
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Editors

Potential Problems with Peer Responding in ESL Writing Classes

■ Many native speaker composition classes and increasing numbers of ESL composition classes use small group work and peer responding to improve writing. Teachers who have used peer responding are generally convinced of its usefulness, but many are unaware of the special problems ESL writers and readers face when asked to comment on a classmate’s writing. These problems stem partly from ESL students’ lack of experience in using techniques like peer responding and partly from the varying rhetorical expectations that readers from other cultures bring to a text. This paper discusses the issues surrounding the attempt to bring ESL writers into the American academic discourse community through the use of peer responding in ESL writing classes.

Few teachers who have used peer responding in their writing classes would be willing to do away with the undeniable benefits of this technique, one that has been with us since at least the last century (Gere, 1987). In the late 60s and early 70s a spate of doctoral dissertations on native speaker writing classes reported research investigating which classes made greater gains in writing ability—those which employed peer responding, with or without teacher responses, or those which employed only teacher response (Ford, 1978; Lagana, 1972; Pierson, 1976). Some findings showed greater gains among the classes which employed peer responding. Other findings showed no difference between the experimental classes and the control classes. But all the studies concluded that peer responding is superior to teacher response alone since it produces results at least as good as, if not better than, teacher response classes and has the additional advantage of reducing teacher work loads.

Peer responding came somewhat later in ESL writing classes, but the same kinds of results came from research on peer responding in ESL writing classes (Chaudron, 1983). Furthermore, teachers who use this technique often comment on its ability to promote a sense of community in the ESL writing class, to help students develop a clearer sense of audience, to make real the idea that writing must communicate a message, and to encourage a willingness to revise.