

# The Writing Process and Writing Classrooms

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## The writing process and native speaker writers

“Perhaps the most pervasive and most dangerous false belief some writers have is that there is no writing process, that experienced writers simply sit down at the typewriter, begin at the beginning, and write through to the end, with no planning, revision, or break in the linear flow” (Krashen, pg. 33). Writing teachers know from experience in their classrooms that students often think that good writers get things right the first time, which shows that they, as students, are not “good writers.” The need for any revision makes students feel discouraged and as if they are failures. Out of such mistaken thinking, recent theory developed in the field of the teaching of writing. The first such theorists were teachers who dealt with college classrooms of native speaker writers, theorists such as Murray (1968), Shaughnessy (1977), Perl (1979), Elbow (1981), Smith (1982), Graves (1983), Calkins (1983), and Flower (1985). These theorists using different methods discovered how writers actually go about the act of writing. Murray talked with, read and observed many professional writers to find out what they had to say about writing. He found that many write in order to find out more: “‘I write to find out what I’m thinking about.’ said Edward Albee. ‘For me the initial delight is in the surprise of remembering something I didn’t know I knew.’ wrote Robert Frost” (Murray, pg. 22). Murray also relied upon his own experiences as a writer and his work with teachers of writing to discover the composing process of writers as they work on their pieces. Graves (1983) and Calkins (1983) did ethnographic research to discover the writing process of children as they wrote pieces in their classrooms.

Out of such observations by many in the field, theory has been developed to describe the writing process. These theorists suggest that all writers go through a similar process no matter how professional they are in their craft. There are individual idiosyncrasies. This process is not a set of rules that follows a certain, defined order, but rather it is a flexible, recursive process including different “stages” that writers pay attention to as they work. For some pieces, particular stages are more important than others, but most writers would say that they have gone through all of the stages to complete most of the things that they have written.

### *The writing process*

Different theorists use different labels to name these stages, but most would agree that there are three definite parts to this process: pre-writing, writing of more than one draft, and revising. Murray labels the parts of the process as follows: collecting, focusing, ordering, developing, and clarifying. The first three parts are pre-writing or rehearsal in that first, information is being sought for a piece; secondly, this information is then examined in order to determine a focus for a particular piece of writing; and thirdly, the information is ordered in some way which connects the different bits of information in a way that will be meaningful for both the writer and for those who will be reading the piece. Of course, some writing will take place in these initial stages of the process, for the author will need to keep track of the information he/she finds as well as work at different ways of focusing and/or ordering the material the author wants to present to his readers. And yet this writing is not drafting, but is used for planning.

After quite a bit of exploring and ordering a writer is actually able to begin drafting a piece. Theorists discovered that professional writers struggle as they work on drafts of their pieces. However, skilled writers learn to postpone polishing a piece until they have actually composed what they want to say. However, these statements are too simplistic a description of what actually happens. As writers compose most all feel the war between composing what they want to say and clarifying or correcting their mistakes. Most all writers find themselves trying to work on these conflicting aspects all at once. Mistakes seem to scream out to writers as they are composing, but theorists learned from their research, that skilled writers work very hard to separate composing from clarifying or editing.

Studies show that good writers differ from poor writers in their composing processes, that is, they have better and more sound procedures for getting their ideas down on paper. Specifically, good writers differ in three ways: in planning, rescanning, and revising . . . Interviews conducted by Rose (1980) and Sommers (1980) show that not only do good writers plan more, they also have more flexible plans—they are more willing to change their ideas as they write and to revise their outline as new ideas and arguments emerge . . . all writers have the problem of 'losing their place,' of losing a sense of the whole essay while in the act of writing. Good writers are aware of this problem and reread and rescan in order to review their overall plan and goals, consider improvements, and incorporate new ideas (Krashen, pg. 12, 14, 15).

The complexity of what is happening is what theorists discovered by learning more about writers. “. . . think of writing as an organic, developmental process in which you start writing at the beginning—before you know your meaning at all—and encourage your words gradually to change and evolve. Only at the end will you know what you want to say or the words you want to say it with” (Elbow, pg. 15). Murray describes this as an act of discovery. Writers explore their own thinking as they write. For many this act of discovery makes writing worthwhile and exciting.

Teachers of writing need always to be mindful of the very complexity of what they are asking of their students. Lindemann quotes a useful metaphor from a study by Flower and Hayes to

describe what real writers are like at work:

“A writer caught in the act looks much more like a very busy switchboard operator trying to juggle a number of demands on her attention and constraints on what she can do:

She has two important calls on hold. (Don’t forget that idea.)

Four lights just started flashing. (They demand immediate attention or they’ll be lost.)

A party of five wants to be hooked up together. (They need to be connected somehow.)

A party of two thinks they’ve been incorrectly connected. (Where do they go?)

And throughout this complicated process of remembering, retrieving, and connecting, the operator’s voice must project calmness, confidence, and complete control (“The Dynamics of Composing,” pg. 33).

“For better or worse, we exert a significant influence on our students’ writing. To improve it, we ought to know what writers do and appreciate how complex the composing process is for most people” (Lindemann, pg. 30).

A summary of research of native speaker writers as they work on the composing process and its findings is given below:

**Table one**

*Research on the Writing Process*

<b>study</b>	<b>subjects</b>	<b>findings</b>
Stallard Pianko Wall & Petrovsky	high school college freshmen college freshmen	good writers plan more
Stallard Wall & Petrovsky Birdwell	high school college freshmen high school	good writers reread, rescan more
Sommers Faigley & Witte	“experienced” and novice writers	experienced writers use revision for invention, finding new ideas
Sommers Stallard	as above high school	novice writers use revision for clarification; to find the “right words”
Perl	college freshmen (remedial)	remedial writers confuse revision with editing, focus on mechanics, spelling
Sommers	as above	experienced writers willing to recycle, have “recursive” writing process

(Krashen, pg. 18).

## **The writing process and ESL writers**

If the writing process is this complicated for native speaker writers, how much more complex it must be for non-native speaker writers! Researchers such as Raimes (1983 a & b) and Zamel (1987) have written extensively about ESL writers, trying to understand the composing process of these writers. One notable aspect of ESL writing is that completed pieces often contain grammatical errors. ESL writers, from early on in the process, are confronted by errors. When to handle such errors becomes of importance. Zamel's research found that "... the more skilled writers delayed consideration of lexical and grammatical problems until the final stages of their writing—they did not let their second language weaknesses tangle their composing process. On the other hand, the least skilled writers were determined not to commit errors and therefore attended to them prematurely" (Zamel, pg. 178). This finding is not unlike what researchers have discovered about native speaker writers. Those who consider content and form at the same time have difficulties which result in poor writing; whereas, those who consider how to put their ideas together as of most importance, end up with better written pieces.

One result that has come out of research looking at ESL writers is that these writers need even more practice in writing than native speakers (Krashen, pg. 33). Another way of stating this might be that such students require more time. As Shaughnessy has noted, a foreign student is expected to make errors in English, and certain L2 errors must be tolerated for a far longer time than the actual period of instruction about such errors. Only over time will such errors "be rubbed off. ..." (Shaughnessy, pg. 121). Such L2 errors may well continue far beyond the length of one composition course. This then becomes a point of pedagogical importance for the teacher of writing. "... we need to give our students what is always in short supply in the writing classroom—time. The time they need to write has to take precedence over the time we need to complete a syllabus or cover the course material" (Raimes, pg. 248). Perhaps only seeds of what is right and correct can be planted within a course. Rather the teacher of writing is to encourage students to believe in themselves, to believe that they have something worthwhile to say, and that in time these writers will be able to say what they want to say.

### ***Errors and the writing process***

Errors, what happens to them, who "fixes" them, and techniques for handling them are an important aspect of the research that has resulted from work with both native speaker writers and ESL writers. Perl, in an intensive study of five unskilled college, native speaker writers, found that such writers focus more on form and less on what they are trying to say when they are in the composing/drafting stage of the writing process. "Tony, for example had a concern for correct form that actually inhibited the development of ideas. In none of the writing sessions did he ever write more than two sentences before he began to edit. Of 2,134 changes Tony made in his composing, over several compositions, only 24 had to do with content" (Krashen, pg. 16, 17). The unskilled writers in Perl's study, too, often confused editing with revising and thought that editing skills were essential to the composing process. But as theorists for good writers have

noted, such premature editing interferes with the rhythm of composing. "The habit of compulsive, premature editing doesn't just make writing hard. It also makes writing dead" (Elbow, pg. 6). If such are the results of studies done on unskilled native speaker writers, how much more important are the implications for pedagogy for ESL writers.

How to prevent premature editing becomes of primary importance in ESL classrooms especially. Raimes and Zamel have suggested a wealth of techniques (see Taniguchi, 1990, for a more complete discussion of this topic). Conferences with peers and the teacher, checklists and mini-lessons are some of the possible ways teachers have for working within the writing process and yet recognizing the special needs of their L2 writers. Other suggestions for teachers include the need for concrete, attainable goals. Students want to be able to see evidence of their own progress. Urging students to work on a limited number of problems at one time, is one way of offering realistic help to writers. In conferences teachers can show by their words that their emphasis is upon the content of what is being said rather than the fine points of form. For example, suggesting to a student to listen to the rhythm of the sentences he/she has written, might be a new way of getting students to be aware that they are writing for an audience. If most of the sentences have the same rhythm, the boredom of that can be noted. Teaching to vary sentence length is one way to deal with this problem. The emphasis is upon the whole. Revising then becomes a creative act and is not simply working on the mechanics, but takes into consideration the extraordinary power of language, its rhythm and poetry.

The contributions which have come out of research for ESL writers show that the writing process seems to be basically alike for all writers, but that certain aspects of the process have implications for what happens in ESL classrooms which differ in emphasis to some extent from what happens in native speaker writing classrooms. In both, poor or unskilled writers tend to place too much emphasis upon form rather than in working on the content of what they want to say. However, ESL classrooms show a need for an extended length of time to handle errors in particular. Studies also suggest that teachers guide students with concrete, specific goals. All unskilled writers might profit from such suggestions, but hopefully ESL writers will find such means of help realistic and encouraging.

### **The writing process and FL writers**

Writing classrooms in a foreign setting (FL) have not been so widely researched as those of native speaker writers and ESL writers. This is an area that requires more work in the future. Some statements can be found in the literature regarding Japanese students: "Coming from Japanese high schools, most college students in Japan are not used to using the writing process to produce compositions" (Lokon, pg. 21).

An additional problem for many Japanese students is that making mistakes is something to be avoided in Japan. In general, students are trained to be precise and answer only when they are sure they are correct. As such, it seems natural that Japanese students would feel anxious when put into situations in which they must make mistakes (Cantor, pg. 1).

These generalizations have not come out of research studies but are the results of what classroom teachers have experienced while working with Japanese college students.

My own experiences would concur with the above statements, for most all of the students I have had contact with in my many years of teaching in Japan, have not known about the writing process nor do they like situations, such as writing, in which they are bound to make mistakes. There have been some exceptions—good writers who seem to be like those Zamel was describing in her work—students who were not so much concerned about whether or not they were writing in a second language, but were more concerned about getting down on paper the ideas they had which they were trying to express.

Samples from student writings show that as students come into the classroom, they are basically at a sentence level. For most students, composition courses in high school have meant translating a Japanese sentence into English or vice versa. Or students say that their writing experiences have been exclusively concerned with grammar.

### *Samples of junior college students' writing and the writing process*

In order to understand junior college student writers in Japan, looking at samples of their work over time might shed some light on the reality of the situation. An analysis of these samples is one kind of exploratory research to try to understand more about FL writing in Japan. Given a 20 minute block of time and told to write about their vacation time, second year junior college students wrote the following sentences/paragraph during their first composition class of the year.

(Student errors are left as they appeared): First sample, "I had stayed in American for 1 month as a homestay. So I didn't work so much." (sic) Second sample, "Yesterday I took five classes. Fifth class is French (II). So when, I came home, I was very tired and after supper (dinner?) I went to bed. By the way the supper is Takenoko-rice. It was delicious!!" (sic) Third sample, "I worked so hard and made much money and spent most of that." (sic) All three samples, which were typical pieces of the 65 compositions students I teach in one college year, are short. Students struggled to write even a few words. Not all of the compositions were even on the topic, such as sample number two. All were concerned about errors as their papers showed words crossed out and/or erasures. The second sample shows that students struggle with word choices and are not quite certain about their choices as they draft their compositions. For many paragraphing is not really understood or even used. Students simply wrote sentences, connecting them, but not necessarily showing awareness that each topic requires a separate paragraph.

Samples of student writing in which students are actually talking about their writing also sheds light upon their difficulties as perceived by themselves, their concerns, and their insights into their own improvement:

#### Sample four

Though I turned in composition every time, I often did the work the preceding day. I couldn't diside what I write usually.

In this class, I have many and many time to consult my Japanese-English dictionary. A year passed, but I have only few English word. (sic)

#### Sample five

I don't like studying English. Especially, to say about English composition, I hate. But this course is very interested. I enjoyed about talking, writing and reading. I could know what class mates thought about. It was very pleased for me. And it was good idea to make a book (Our biography) (sic)

#### Sample six

I studied a lot of things in this class. The things are not only English but also about myself. I was interested in writing my biography. It was very hard. But I didn't think it was bad! I can know about myself and my friends. (sic)

#### Sample seven

This class has being HARD!! Of course, NOW is also. We must think, write better sentences in every lesson. But HARD brings FUN. Journal gave good memories because I could write lightheartedly about many things that I want to say to you. By writing about myself, I was glad you can know me. I tried to make you laugh. Did you laugh? (sic).

#### Sample eight

When I heard that we had to write jurnal almost every week, I thought, "it is very hard work!". But there were a lot of things to write every week. And, first, I had to use dictionary many times, to write a piece of paper of jurnal. But, gradually, it got fewer times to use it. It is pleased for me.

And to write biography was good lesson for me to write English. And, it was also intesting. Because—I heard a lot of things when I was child from my mother, and looked a lot of pictures when I was child, and so on. So I could recollect my childhood days. I enjoyed it. (sic)

#### Sample nine

In the first time of this course you told us the purpose of this course and you gave us homework, for example, jarnal. Then I thought that I could not do perfectly. Composition is hard for me because I don't know English words. So Thursday was coming, I didn't know what I wrote.

But, one day, I found that I liked to write something in English. Whenever I wrote something, I enjoyed writing, and I was very looking forward to your comments.

Project! Certainly, It was hard for us. I made a lot of mistakes. It was hard for you to read it, I think. . . .

Sometimes I write a letter to a friend in New Zealand. Her mother wrote that my English was good. I was glad. . . . (sic)

### **Analysis of samples and implications for the classroom**

By thinking about what the students have said as they reflect on their learning after a year's course, a teacher realizes how concerned students usually are about their English ability; they worry about topics, they worry about writing "perfectly," they worry about mistakes, and they worry about vocabulary. Many students feel they have inadequacies which must make it difficult for a reader. Students are aware that they are writing for someone else to read, but they are not certain how to make their writing comprehensible. These concerns sound very much like the ones that Shaughnessy has described about unskilled native speaker writers. ". . . writing is but a line that moves haltingly across the page, exposing as it goes all that the writer doesn't know, then passing into the hands of a stranger who reads it with a lawyer's eyes, searching for flaws

(Shaughnessy, pg. 7). As students seem aware of the revealing nature of the written word, it is no wonder that many dislike composition classes and feel ill-prepared for such a course.

When students were asked to write a page long composition on one of two topics: "What to do by the time I graduate" or "My spring vacation," even more is revealed about the types of errors these second year students commonly make. Such errors can be used diagnostically to help a writing teacher know what kinds of lessons to teach. "We do know that errors are worth careful study, and that if we use errors as a window into our student's minds, we can be more knowledgeable and timely in our teaching" (Calkins b, pg. 202). Samples of the first paragraph approximately are included here for analysis:

Sample ten

I have a dream.  
That's what I become a stewardess.  
So, I hope to become a stewardess.  
All I have to do is to study for it now.  
It is difficult to enter "airline."  
So I must do my best.  
By the time I graduate, I do it first.  
It is very important for me to do it.  
If I become a stewardess, I am going to be a stewardess who is liked everyone.  
I stand firm for it. (sic)

Sample eleven

I worked at a Chinese restaurant and McDonald's during spring vacation. What I did at the chinese restaurant was an escort. I just guided the customers to their seats or rooms. That was my new job. I mean I had been working at McDonald's for a year or so. But I never did the job at a restaurant. And it was more difficult than I had thought. I had to care about the words or my postures, because the restaurant was a high-class one and some of customers were members of an assembly, presidents of companies or doctors. (sic)

Without considering the many grammatical errors at the outset, the most striking error is that of paragraphing in sample ten. The writer, as I've found common among many college students, was basically writing in English in a similar manner as she would write in Japanese. Each sentence begins at the beginning of a new line. Connections are not shown as they are in the appearance of an English composition through paragraph form. This then might be analyzed as an error of native language transfer, or a signal that paragraph form as such has not yet been taught to these students. Granted that these students have read English paragraphs in textbooks over many years; this does not necessarily mean that they have made the connection that how they see English printed on a page has anything to do with their own writing. However, some students seem to make this connection without necessarily having it taught, or perhaps some have been taught paragraphing in other classes. A teacher cannot assume by the second year of junior college what a student has or has not been taught regarding English composition. A teacher can only look at the errors and make decisions about what needs to be taught to the class as a whole. As there were many compositions like sample ten, paragraphing is one point that can be emphasized in mini-lessons.



Similarities and differences between sample ten and sample eleven are apparent. Both students at the beginning of their second year make mistakes in articles and in deleting important function words such as verbs. However, the writer in sample eleven has less problems with word choice and with writing a page long composition. She is a “better” writer in that she knows that including details about the topic will make it more understandable and interesting for a reader. Using words such as “I mean I had been working. . . .” indicates a clear desire to want to make the reader understand her work career. She’s already an experienced worker, and yet this new job had new responsibilities. She also clearly uses transitional words to make connections within her paragraph. These connectives are not always used in a grammatically correct manner, but words such as “but” and “and” were used to join different ideas together.

On the other hand, the writer in sample ten appears to be trying to fill up the page. The reader soon knows that this writer wants to become a stewardess, but the writer repeats this idea at least three times within this first segment of the composition. The writer in sample ten uses a mixture of sentence patterns, but these patterns are not correct grammatically, for she makes a dependent clause into a sentence and repeats this error throughout the piece. Vocabulary building and the necessity for complete sentences are more topics for mini-lessons that might result from analysis of these samples. Looking at the errors in a larger context focuses attention in a new way.

At the same time as the teacher and students are learning some lessons from students’ pieces, they can be learning about and experiencing the writing process. As students write journals for each class, which are not corrected for grammatical errors, they practice writing longer pieces on a regular basis so that they become freer in expressing their intended messages. Students, at the same time as they are writing journals, will be working on a longer piece that will go through the writing process as Murray et al. have described. They will be learning how to take responsibility for their own writing, including some of the most important grammar errors as well. In other words, students work on one writing project over time to create and refine their pieces. Error correction cannot be completely eliminated and should not be. “. . . grammar has a role to play in what should be the final stage of the composing process, editing. . . . These (grammar) items can and should be taught; their absence give writing an unpolished and uneducated look. What is crucial, however, is that this aspect of the language arts programme not be allowed to dominate; it is a small part of teaching students to write” (Krashen, pg. 35). How errors are identified and how students learn to take responsibility for them is part of the work that goes on in writing classrooms.

Postponing error correction until the end of the process is advocated by theorists of native speaker writers and ESL writers so as not to interrupt the creative flow. Writers are told not to worry about their errors until their pieces are written. However, teachers often find that telling students this is easy but following through with this dictum is another matter. One teacher put it this way, “My hands are sore from sitting on them,” she joked. “But it’s the only way I can keep from wielding my red pen. . . . My one purpose in reading their papers used to be to find

their mistakes” (Calkins a, pg. 33). Teacher conferences then are used to appreciate what a writer has written, the overall contents. In other words, teachers give some praise about that has been written, plus use a few minutes to teach something new, such as about paragraphing or the need for complete sentences with verbs.

Chenoweth suggests that a teacher might also concentrate only upon a section of a paper for revision. Not all errors in each and every composition would be corrected by the end of the process, but a certain section of the project would have gone through the process in its entirety. This allows the student to focus attention and take control gradually which sounds like a realistic approach for FL writers in particular (Wardell, pg. 36). If teachers continue to concentrate their attention upon correcting surface level mistakes, students are unlikely to develop their writing beyond the sentence level. They will become “stuck” on errors and continue the feelings of failure that the writing process is trying to break down. Editing conferences that suggest a specific goal for the next composition, based on the errors of the composition currently being discussed is one way to encourage the development of writers. One piece is not overworked to the boredom of both the teacher and writer, but rather that piece is used as a jumping off point for the next adventure in writing.

Peer correction is another way of having writers learn about errors, writer responsibility for errors, and about audience. A writer might underline segments or words in his/her own piece about which he/she is unsure, then peers might exchange pieces and talk about these problem areas. The peer reader might be able to offer suggestions to the writer about the underlined parts of the composition, and the reader might also find a few more segments that would benefit from some more work by the author. The reader and writer then exchange roles. “Students can remember and benefit more from their mistakes by talking about them than by having the teacher correct them” (Lokon, pg. 22). As students talk about pieces, they learn more about the writing process as a whole and about reading as well.

The writing process is not complete until a piece has been “published.” When students see completed, refined pieces, an appreciation for writing slowly develops as well as a sense of mastery. Samples of a few such pieces show that students are capable of working out many of their own writing problems in order to express that which they want to say.

#### Sample twelve

“What a big baby she is!” I heard my parents thought this when they saw me for the first time. I was born in Yokohama. My grandfather gave me the name “Mamiko”. I was really a big and plump baby. Besides, I ate a lot. I was growing up smoothly, but there was only one problem. I had less hair than usual till I was about two years old! When I had a birthday party at two years old, my cousin gave me a pretty hair pin. I couldn’t use it. (sic)

#### Sample thirteen

Early Summer

The rainy season’s “Good-bye!”

A towering cloud in summer wants to come

Out in the sky.

Anywhere you can hear children's laughing voices.  
A bud of a sunflower wants to bloom  
At any moment.  
The rainy season's "Good-bye!" (sic)  
Nobuyo Okada

## Results

These second year junior college writers in prose and poetry worked to express their ideas in clear and understandable English. For them, using the writing process has had its satisfactions as well as difficulties.

Instead of serving merely as an adjunct to language learning, useful mainly for practice exercises and reinforcement of academic tasks, writing itself has primary value as a language teaching tool. Students can talk and write, experiment, play with language, take their time to find appropriate words and sentences, test out a text and change their minds, and guarantee a response from an audience (Raimes, pg. 252)

Given time and opportunity, students can develop as writers and language learners.

The results of exploring the writing process in an FL setting indicate that teachers owe a debt to researchers and theorists in native speaker settings and ESL settings. What happens to writers using the writing process in each setting is the same and yet different. What happens in an FL setting is again the same and yet even more different. Further research is needed to explore and explain the writing process in FL classrooms. Indications are that more time, more realistic expectations, more concrete goals and suggestions about writing, less demands for perfection for each and every piece, and more willingness to allow students to experiment with language are all ingredients for exciting possibilities.

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