

HOW THEY WRITE: AN ANALYSIS OF THE  
COMPOSING PROCESS OF ESL  
COLLEGE STUDENTS

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Dedicated to my parents

## PREFACE

Very little research has been conducted on the composing processes used by non-native speakers when they compose in English. This study was designed to help fill this need. Students of varying writing abilities were selected from those enrolled in the composition program for international students at Oklahoma State University. A double-interview system was used to elicit descriptions of these students' writing processes. I then compared these descriptions, along with my conclusions, with comparable research in both native and non-native speaker composing processes.

Some general characteristics of skilled and unskilled non-native writers were evident, as well as many similarities between non-native and native speaker composing behaviors. A few significant differences between these two groups were also noted.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Very little is known about the particular problems students face in handling a writing assignment and even less is known about how to teach them to write well. Traditional composition instruction has been product- not process-oriented and, for this reason, the process of composing has been largely ignored by researchers and instructors alike until fairly recently. Successful writers draw upon a store of skills, many of them non-linguistic, in order to create a well-organized, coherent essay. The acquisition of such skills is, however, still little understood. For non-native speakers, the difficulty of acquiring English composition skills is compounded by their lack of proficiency in the language itself. In addition to the problems of expressing thoughts using a strange grammar and vocabulary, these ESL (English as a Second Language) students are often struggling with unfamiliar concepts of rhetoric and discourse. ESL composition instructors have usually taught their classes in much the same way as native-speaker composition classes compensating as best they can for the special problems faced by their non-native students.

Current evidence suggests that skilled writers differ from unskilled writers not only in the quality of their finished work, but also in the composing processes used to produce it (Emig 1978, Perl 1979, Pianko 1979, Beach 1976, Sommers 1980, Faigley and Witte 1981). This evidence, however, is almost exclusively drawn from studies of native-speaker composing processes. Very few studies have examined the composing processes of ESL students and there exists a need for further research in this area in order to determine how ESL students write and how effective composition instruction has been in the ESL classroom. Only when we have more information concerning ESL composing processes and problems can we fully realize the implications of native-speaker research for the ESL composition classroom. Additionally, information about the writing behavior of ESL students may provide some insight regarding the composing process in general and the act of writing itself.

#### Statement of Problem

At Oklahoma State University, non-native students are required to take English composition classes structured parallel to, but conducted separately from, native student classes. These ESL students reflect a diversity of linguistic, educational, and cultural backgrounds and the task of finding the most efficient and universal approach to developing their composing skills is an extremely challenging one.

Accordingly, this study addressed and answered three specific questions: (1) What processes, strategies, and techniques do ESL students at Oklahoma State University, currently enrolled in first and second level ESL composition courses, use in developing and refining essays written as out-of-class assignments? (2) What correspondences can be discovered between the students' composing processes, various individual characteristics, and the quality of their written work? (3) How do the results of this study compare with findings reported in previous composing research and what conclusions might then follow?

#### Scope and Objectives

Data for this study were obtained by selecting a group of ESL students from the two composition classes offered to undergraduate non-native speakers at O.S.U., representing as many differing linguistic and cultural backgrounds as possible. The students' writing processes and other information were determined through the oral interview method, questioning each student both before and after an essay assignment had been completed during the regular course of their semester classwork. Due to the time and logistics involved in meeting with twice and at specific periods, only 11 students participated. This small number is, however, consistent with studies dealing with the analysis of student writing processes (Emig 1971, Perl 1979, Pianko 1979, Zamel 1982, 1983, Raimes 1985).

Although direct observation of students' composing processes was not feasible within the limits of this study, I felt that the double interview system would provide reliable descriptions of what was occurring as ESL students struggled to generate their English compositions. These descriptions would therefore fulfill the primary objectives of this investigation, those being (1) To determine the actual composing processes of ESL students, outside of the constraints of time limits, (2) To examine and analyze the results, and (3) To place those results within the context of contemporary ESL composing research and writing research in general.

#### Synopsis of Chapters

Chapter II of this paper sets forth the research, results, and suggestions of literature concerning the writing processes of skilled and unskilled, native and non-native composition students (for the most part, at the college level) that have been published over the past ten years. The background, methods, and procedures of this particular research study are then presented and explained in Chapter III: results and analysis of study findings follow in Chapter IV. The conclusions of the study are reported in Chapter V, along with a discussion of the implications they may hold for the teaching of English composition in the ESL classroom.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Literature concerned with observing and reporting on the actual composing processes of student writers--both skilled and unskilled--was almost non-existent until about 15 years ago; only since the late 1970's has the subject of how ESL students compose (in English) received any attention at all. Traditionally, the main emphasis in English composition and ESL classrooms alike has been on the finished product: a coherent and well-organized essay. Little consideration has previously been given to the idea that how one composes might be an important determiner of what the final written outcome may be. It is still tacitly accepted that good writers are born, not made. Writing has always been regarded as an idiosyncratic and highly individual process, which indeed it is, and serious investigation as to its role in shaping the final form of a composition had never been undertaken to any significant degree before 1970. Since then, researchers have generally agreed on the fact that skilled writers differ from unskilled writers not only in the quality of their written work, but just as importantly in the manner in which they go about creating that work.

Evidently, one of the keys to understanding how to write effectively is to be found in the writing process itself.

My purpose in this chapter is to review the current literature on native-speaker and ESL composing processes, beginning with background on early studies of the writing process, in order to provide a broad perspective on what is presently known, or speculated, about composing processes in general and second language composing processes in particular.

### Native Speaker Composing Processes

The teaching of composition has traditionally focused on imparting to students an appreciation of what constitutes a well-written and informative piece of writing. The subject matter of instruction has always been the end product of composing, not the composing process itself. Although it is well known that skilled writers use a wide, and often eccentric, variety of techniques in formulating thought into prose, so little has been understood about how writing processes affect the act and product of writing that teachers have taken their models for instruction from the only source available to them--the ideal essay structure, as inferred from the writing of expert writers.

Janet Emig (1971) was one of the first researchers to take a hard look at how students, in this case several twelfth graders, actually tackled a writing assignment. Her study differed in two major respects from the few

previous investigations of student writing processes (Rohman-Wieck 1964, Tovatt-Miller 1967). First, she employed the case-study approach and observed a small number of students at length. Second, she refrained from any experimentation with teacher intervention or instruction during composing and simply observed what normal processes the students went through when left on their own while writing an in-class assignment. This and other secondary school studies (Stallard 1974, Beach 1979), were soon followed by similar research studies of college level student writers. All of these investigations were conducted on a small scale, usually involving fewer than 10 students and seeking a mixture of skilled and unskilled writers.

Richard Beach (1976) made an early, but limited, study of the composing processes of college writers--concentrating only on how they evaluated and revised their own compositions. Students in his study were found to consistently fall into either of two categories: Those who revised extensively and primarily for the sake of form. Beach's extensive revisers, who were the better writers, were found to be more capable of distancing themselves from their writing, and thus made better appraisals of revision needs than the minimal revisers (his so-called nonrevisers), who were more inclined to do the job quickly and concentrated only on revising for error correction.

Murray (1978) describes this distinction between revising for content and revising for form as internal versus



external revision. The process of re-reading and revising is not enough to create a good essay; it must be done with a specific purpose and attitude--a sincere desire to communicate to an audience, not simply refine surface features of the text. Skilled writers are able to consider and accomodate the reader's needs as they look over their writing. The result, as Linda Flower describes it, is that "effective writers do not simply express thought but transform it in certain complex but describable ways for the needs of a reader" (1979:19). In a follow-up study using high school students as subjects, Beach (1979) compared the results of teacher-evaluations with student self-evaluations of rough drafts. He discovered that teacher guidance during the early composing stages encouraged and promoted better essay writing by helping students learn to develop a critical eye for content revision.

Among the first to make a comprehensive study of college student composing processes was Sharon Pianko (1979), who observed and interviewed a cross-section of freshman composition students in order to determine their writing processes. Her results also showed a clear difference between the more skilled and less skilled writers (characterized by Pianko as traditional and remedial writers). This difference was most evident, Pianko noted, in the use and extent of the non-writing behaviors of pausing and rescanning:

What characterizes poor writers in addition to the low quality of the products they produce are their underdeveloped composing processes, a factor which is rarely taken into account in teaching composition, but which significantly influences the outcome of the product. Although the processes are the same for traditional writers and remedial writers, for remedial writers they are of much shorter duration and of poorer quality (1979:20).

Like Beach's students, the better writers in Pianko's study were set apart from the less skilled writers by their greater degree of involvement with their essay topics and their possession of a critical eye for assessing the communicative quality and value of their essay content. As Pianko concluded: "What basically separates the two groups of writers is the ability to reflect on what is being written" (1979:20).

Despite the wide variety of methods initially used in studies of the composing process, the basic results of almost all observations were fundamentally the same: skilled writers, i.e. those who ultimately produce good essays, spent a great deal of their time and energy in re-reading what they had already written, revising and rewriting extensively in order to satisfy themselves that meaning was being effectively communicated. The correlations between process characteristics and product quality were found not to be those assumed in traditional pedagogy. As Emig (1975) noted, study of what really occurred when someone sat down to write exploded the generalizations propounded by generations of rhetoric and composition tests, namely that

could be conceived as a linear process, progressing from an initial stage--such as outlining--through ordered steps to a final, well-organized essay.

Researchers soon realized that a finished composition cannot be regarded as an "analogue for the process of skilled writers prove to be anything but linear, ordered, and well planned. Writing turns out to be a recursive process, decidedly nonlinear, and as much a process of discovery as a method of recording thought. As most studies found, pre-planning or outlining was not the preferred way of launching into an essay, since the final form of the essay of good writers was almost invariably shaped during the process of writing itself, and not pre-figured to any great extent by its authors (Emig 1977, Stallard 1976, Pianko 1979, Sommers 1980). Consistent use of the discovery process seems to be a trademark of the good writers, as Witte and Faigley (1981) concluded: "The better writers seem to have a better command of invention skills. . .The poorer writers, in contrast, appear deficient in these skills"(1981:197).

Cooper and Odell (1978) published a comprehensive collection of essays devoted to presenting research and issues in the field of writing process studies. Earlier research now formed the groundwork for more detailed examination of what the composing process might indicate about the cognitive processes involved in writing and the act of composing itself. One problem, however, soon became evident, that being the lack of a standard set of procedures for eliciting and reporting on the writing process, per se.

In her study of how unskilled college students write, Sondra Perl (1979) focused her attention not only on recording the writing processes of a specific type of writer (unskilled), but also on establishing a systematic way of handling and analysing the observations she was making. A serious limitation to process studies existed, Perl noted, in the way in which most observations were being recorded: "Narrative descriptions of composing processes do not provide sufficiently graphic evidence for the perception of underlying regularities and patterns" (1979:317). After developing and employing a system of categorizing and describing writing activities observed during her research, she discovered that each of her unskilled writers demonstrated consistent, individual composing behaviors across various writing situations. This stability of process habits and strategies led her to question the conventional use of terms such as remedial or unskilled writer, arguing instead that poor writers actually possessed well-developed writing strategies, although often counter-productive strategies. The traditional assumption behind the use of these terms is that the poor writer should be treated as a beginner, one who must be taught how to write. But, as Perl points out:

. . .this view ignores the highly elaborated, embedded processes the students bring with them. These unskilled college writers are not beginners in a tabula rasa sense, and teachers err in assuming they are. The results of this study suggest that teachers may first need to identify which

characteristic components of each students' process facilitate writing and which inhibit it before further teaching takes place (1979:334).

An important question facing composition researchers has been how students develop composing skills in the first place. Many of the underlying skills needed in writing do not appear to be readily teachable, yet writers somehow acquire and develop those skills. Smith (1983) proposed that good writers, beginning in childhood, acquire many of their underlying abilities in composing by learning to "read like writers" (1983:561). In other words, they learn to identify with an author as they read and view the text as if they were writing it themselves. Smith considers that this kind of exercise in vicarious composition may be one way in which children learn to write with a reader's needs in mind. But reading alone does not ensure that good writing skills will develop. Readers must see themselves as part of a club of writers, and writing practice is necessary to strengthen this sense of belonging: "Writing enables one to perceive oneself as a writer, as a member of the club, and thus to learn to write by reading" (Smith 1983:564).

The discovery that the writing process is characterized by the interplay of linguistic, cognitive, and intellectual skills has led to an important change in the way educators and theorists view writing. A composition is no longer regarded as graphic speech. Writing, it is generally agreed, results from a creative process which is quite different from those processes responsible for speaking or other

forms of communication. In particular, as Emig (1977) notes, "writing represents a unique mode of learning-- not merely valuable, not merely special, but unique" (1977:122). The act of writing and discovering what to write are interwoven and interdependent activities. Although most good writers do some sort of pre-planning before beginning to write in earnest (Emig 1977, Stallard 1974, Pianko 1979), the usefulness of traditional outlining is extremely limited. The skilled writer understands that writing is in itself an essential heuristic activity. As Stallard (1976) pointed out, "knowledge of the form or content of the message to be communicated is not necessarily in possession of the writer when the need to write is felt" (1976:182).

The implication of native speaker composing research have been slow to take hold in the composition classroom. Krashen (1984) reasons that this is partly attributable to the fact that "relevant research has not been presented to teachers in a coherent way; that is, in the form of a theory" (1982:2). However, several strategies for loosening up students' approaches to writing have been put forward as a result of composing research. Since many studies have indicated that students' writing abilities are greatly restricted by the imposition of time limits and dull, irrelevant topics, researchers have suggested that teachers assign more essays as take-home work and make an effort to find topics which are of personal and immediate interest

to the students (Beach 1979, Perl 1979, Pianko 1979). Experimental use of pre-writing, free-writing, and other creative heuristic devices has been encouraged in the classroom (Flower and Hayes 1977, McKay 1981) in order to show students the usefulness of writing as a discovery process. Finally, researchers recommend that teacher evaluations of essays are best utilized by the students when made during the essay writing process (Beach 1979, Pianko 1979).

Most composition classes are now implementing some or one of the foregoing recommendations for improving the development of writing skills. But such fitful applications of new methods is far from signaling a widespread shift in the thinking of writing teachers. Comprehensive summaries of recent and relevant information, such as Krashen's Writing: Research, Theory, and Applications (1984), do much for consolidating current knowledge and providing a basis for a modern theory of writing.

#### ESL Student Composing Processes

Early studies of students' writing processes and their implications for teaching composition skills were all but ignored by ESL composition teachers. An assumption that native speakers' writing problems were far removed from those of ESL writers seemed to account for the hesitation of ESL professionals to regard the results of native speaker research as pertinent to their own concerns. Zamel (1976) lamented the fact that there existed almost no observational

data on the composing processes of ESL students in the mid-70's, despite the growing interest among English composition teachers in process-oriented studies of the writing habits of students. She pointed out that such research could, and should, have a great impact on the teaching of composition to ESL students, since they wrestle with organizing and expressing their thoughts just as native speakers do, regardless of their skill in the language (Zamel 1976:67).

Teachers of ESL composition courses have traditionally concentrated upon teaching their students to master the manipulation of grammatical and structural patterns in the belief that such mastery of language forms would inevitably help the students in developing expressive language use. As awareness of the need for instruction in rhetorical concepts began to carry over from native speaker composition classrooms, ESL teachers added rhetorical patterns to their list of composition skills exercise. Composition instruction in ESL classes closely parallels (unfortunately) traditional native speaker composition instruction. Students are taught to outline, draft, and correct their essays as if writing were a unidirectional, ordered process. The only difference, it is generally assumed, is that ESL students require extra help with grammar and other aspects of basic language use. Vivian Zamel (1976) was one of the first ESL researchers who, having looked over the accumulating evidence of native speaker writing studies, began



to take issue with the sole dependence of ESL methodology on teaching pattern manipulation. Such manipulation, Zamel argued, whether grammatical or rhetorical, was still a far cry from teaching those students how to develop true composing skills:

Writing for the ESL student is still essentially seen as the formation of a habit. This imitation of various styles and organization patterns may be helpful for students who are still coping with the acquisition of language. This kind of practice, however, is hardly the expression of genuine thoughts and ideas (1976:70).

Barry Taylor (1976) also pointed out that there is much more entailed in writing, and writing well, than merely the correct use of grammar, vocabulary, and syntax; composing requires certain skills which are of an entirely non-linguistic nature but remain fundamental to good writing (1976:310).

In order to bring classroom teaching methods closer into line with the reality of the composing process Taylor (1981) suggested that revision be given a central place in second language composition instruction. ESL students need to be encouraged to write and revise in order to discover ideas, not hurried into premature absorption with problems in their language use. The most important skill which ESL students may have to acquire and develop in composing is the ability to critically evaluate their own work, and such a skill usually comes as the result of reading (Smith 1983, Krashen 1984, Taylor 1981). As Taylor (1981)

emphasizes: "One of the most crucial skills to acquire in order to make self-revision possible is critical reading" (1981:11).

Zamel (1982) surveyed the composing processes of skilled ESL writers in order to determine whether her findings would correspond with those reported from native speaker composing studies. ESL students' composing difficulties and habits did, indeed, correspond closely to those of native speakers', indicating that the process of writing was perhaps less dependent upon language proficiency than previously thought. The implications for the ESL composition classroom were clear; as suggested by native speaker research, revision and rewriting were central to the act of creating and discovering ideas, not just refining grammar and form in terms of a final product.

Carrying her investigation of ESL writers' processes a step further, Zamel (1983) conducted a case study of six advanced ESL students which involved actual observation of their composing over several classroom sessions. Her conclusions regarding the problems and needs of the ESL composition student were similar to those reached by most native speaker researchers, namely, that the early stages of composing are often the most crucial for discovering and formulating ideas about the topic at hand. Students need to be encouraged to become involved with a subject and focus on finding something to say, rather than paying

attention to form before meaning has evolved. The discrepancies between skilled and unskilled ESL writers revolve around the difference in priorities the two types of writers each have; the skilled writers consistently place meaning above form during writing, while less skilled writers seem to be obsessed with correctness of linguistic form from the very beginning of their composing (Zamel 1983).

Curious about the specific characteristics and needs of the unskilled ESL writer, Ann Raimés (1985) designed a classroom study to establish how such students write. Using tape-recordings of students' composing processes, made by the students as they wrote during class periods, Raimés hoped to discover what differences might exist between unskilled second language learners and unskilled native language speakers. She was unable to confidently characterize the group's composing processes as a whole, there being too much of an idiosyncratic nature in their individual writing habits. She did, however, report that the unskilled ESL writers appeared to be committed to their task generating quite a lot of written material, concentrating on finding the right words for their needs, and not writing as fast as possible in order to complete the assignment. Unskilled native speakers, on the other hand, have often been found to write fast and furiously, correcting only for errors during re-reading pauses, and more or less uninvolved with their essay subjects, feeling little interest in communicating information or ideas (Pianko 1979, Perl 1979).

As indicated by the research (albeit limited) done on ESL composing processes, there do exist many similarities between the writing behaviors used by native speakers and those used by second language learners. Much more information needs to be developed in order for us to draw apart those elements of the ESL students' writing which reflect lack of or partial language acquisition, and those which arise from more universal processes involved in composing. Enough evidence exists already, I believe, for the ESL composition teacher to borrow ideas on developing students creative abilities in composing from native speaker classrooms and begin to implement those ideas in the ESL classroom as soon as possible.

## CHAPTER III

### BACKGROUND AND PROCEDURES

To place the investigation of international students' English composing processes into some perspective, this chapter provides a brief overview of the ESL undergraduate composition program at Oklahoma State University, along with a description of those international students who took part in the study. This description is followed by an explanation of the questionnaires and procedures used in collecting the data and information about the participating students' English composing processes and skills.

#### The O.S.U. ESL Composition Program

Oklahoma State University requires all undergraduate students to satisfactorily complete two composition classes (or the equivalent): English 1013 (Freshman Composition I for international student only) and English 1323 (Freshman Composition II, 700's series reserved for non-native speakers). Approximately 200-250 international students enroll in ESL undergraduate composition courses at O.S.U. each semester. The methods and objectives of these two courses are similar in most respects to the equivalent classes required of native English-speaking undergraduate students.

Both courses are designed to acquaint students with the rules and conventions of standard English expository prose, the kind of writing they will generally encounter and be expected to produce during their university studies.

English 1013 is intended to help international students master basic sentence patterns, punctuation, mechanics, and dictionary skills, but the major objectives of the course are to teach students how to develop clear and coherent paragraphs and expository essays that are effective expressions of students' thoughts. Students use a text (Smalley and Hank, 1982), along with an English reference guide (MaClin, 1981), and a dictionary. The so-called standard essay organization (SEO) is used as a reference format for most of the required compositions, usually 7-8 essays (some assigned as in-class work, the rest as homework), and one final examination essay (written in class).

English 1323.700 reviews the basics of paragraph and essay organization covered in 1013, and then proceeds to guide the students through the preparation and production of a documented research paper. This process acquaints the international students with library skills as well. Along with the same reference guide used in 1013 (MaClin, 1981) and a dictionary, students in 1323.700 use a text emphasizing research procedures, such as Hamp-Lyons and Courter's Research Matters (1984).

Teachers for English 1013 and 1323.700's are graduate assistants drawn from students enrolled in the O.S.U. English

Department's Graduate Program in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL). These graduate students are usually familiar, therefore, with TESL theory, methodology, and materials. Many of the graduate students also take a course in English composition teaching. The composition courses for non-native speakers are administered by the Director of ESL Composition and are coordinated with, but separate from, the regular English Composition Program.

An important aspect of these two courses is the introduction of the concepts of English rhetoric and modes of discourse to the international students, most of whom are unfamiliar with these concepts, regardless of the degree of English writing proficiency they might already possess. During each composition course, therefore, students develop essays based on standard discourse modes, such as cause and effect, argumentation, comparison and contrast, etc. and encouraged to consider an audience for their compositions. Although the format of SEO is used as the pattern for all compositions written in both of these classes, teachers stress that such organization is a characteristic of the finished composition only (in its most basic form) and not necessarily a description of the composing process itself, which may vary widely among individuals. In the ESL Composition Program at O.S.U., graduate teaching assistants have been strongly encouraged to take note of recent research in composing and its implications for the classroom. Teachers in both ESL composition classes are thus encouraged

to take note of recent research in composing and its implications for the classroom. Teachers in both ESL compositions classes are thus encouraged to experiment with free writing, peer evaluation, and other creative approaches to the composing process in an effort to free-up the students writing styles (Guidelines for Teaching ESL Courses, 1984).

### Subjects

The students interviewed for this project were asked to participate upon the recommendation of their teachers and represent both classes of the ESL undergraduate composition program (English 1013 and 1323). During the Spring 1985 semester, when this study took place, the ESL composition classes were made up of approximately 70% East Asians, 20% Middle Easterners, and 10% other nationalities (for the most part, Spanish speaking). The preponderance of East Asians is naturally reflected in the composition of the subject group, as is the current ratio of male to female students in the international community at O.S.U.

Four ESL composition teachers were asked to select students from their classes to be interviewed on the basis of their demonstrated ability in English composition and their time availability outside of class. Three of the teachers taught English 1013 and one of them taught English 1323; as a consequence, most of the students participating in this study are taken from the first levels did not



necessarily relate to their ability in writing compared with the other members of the study group. After going over their recommendations with me, each teacher then asked the students if they were willing to participate, explained the nature of the study to them, and arranged to introduce the students to me. Most of the students cooperated fully during the study and were able to answer all questions and describe their writing processes with little problem. Originally, 15 students were selected and interviewed; of these, a few were unable to complete the second interview session and ultimately 11 students comprised the total subject group of the study.

Of the students whose interviews are presented and discussed in this paper, one was female and nine were males. Six countries are represented, encompassing five language groups (counting the several Chinese dialects involved as representative of one major language group despite the fact that they are not mutually intelligible in every case.) Most students spoke two languages besides English, many having been primarily educated in a language not that spoken in their homes. Students' native languages given in Table I are their first spoken language.

#### Questionnaire Development

In order to capture the essay writing process as initially envisioned, and later experienced by the students, two separate sets of interview questions were drawn up.

The first set, comprising the pre-essay questionnaire, was made up of questions intended to establish how particular (international) students thought they usually composed-- what techniques they employed, the order in which their essays took shape, and so forth. This pre-essay questionnaire also included some questions regarding students' experiences with reading outside of class and previous courses in composition, in addition to standard background questions concerning languages spoken, nationality, and education. The second set, comprising the post-essay questionnaire, consisted of questions that elicited descriptions of the actual writing processes the students had just then gone through in the composing of their latest essay, and their comments on how those processes had differed, if at all, from their usual writing habits.

The questionnaires were designed to be used in oral interview sessions, thus ensuring not only the students' full understanding of the questions being put to them-- additional explanation was offered whenever students appeared uncertain of questions--but also allowing me, in turn, to obtain full and complete answers from students by asking for clarification or examples where responses were ambiguous or unclear. The students were probably also rather more at ease simply answering questions verbally than they might have been if faced with reading, understanding, and writing responses to a written questionnaire, which would all too closely resemble an examination of their writing skills.

TABLE I  
STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS

Course/ Section	Name	Native Language	Country
1013.3	Abdul (M)	Malay	West Malaysia
1013.3	Ahmed (M)	Arabic	Saudia Arabia
1013.2	Heng (M)	Vietnamese	Vietnam
1013.3	Ann (F)	* Mandarin	East Malaysia
1013.6	Andy (M)	Thai	Thailand
1323.7	Lee (M)	* Mandarin	West Malaysia
1013.6	Sam (M)	* Hokkien	West Malaysia
1013.6	Mohammed (M)	Arabic	Libya
1013.3	Tom (M)	* Cantonese	Singapore
1013.3	Tan (M)	* Hainan	West Malaysia
1323.7	Chin (M)	*Cantonese	West Malaysia

\* These languages all represent dialects of Chinese and, although not mutually intelligible in all cases, have been taken together and considered as one language group for the purpose of this study.

#### Data Collection

On the day a particular class was to be assigned an essay topic for homework (usually due a week later), the subjects from that class met with me individually either

immediately or within an hour or two after the class. A few minutes were spent getting acquainted with the students, noting down names, languages spoken, education, nationality, and in giving a brief explanation of the study in progress. The items from the pre-essay questionnaire were then read to the student and answers noted and clarified if necessary. These initial interviews generally lasted about 20 to 25 minutes per student.

As soon as a student turned in his or her essay assignment (as it happened, not always on the day the teacher had assigned), I met with that student a second time, using the post-essay questionnaire, which concluded with a request for any comments the student might have. This interview usually lasted about 15 minutes, since the student was by then familiar with the process, already acquainted with the interviewer, and prepared for the questions being asked. The post-essay questionnaire was given as soon as possible after students had turned in their essays in order to catch them with a fresh and clear memory of the composing processes which had produced their latest draft of the essay.

After interviewing all of the students participating, I asked each of the students' teachers to give me a brief evaluation of their students' general performance on the essays involved and overall abilities in English composition, including each one's strengths and weaknesses in composing. Since the purpose of this study was not to match

up performance and process, but only to elicit descriptions of the composing processes each student went through, no critical evaluation or correlation was undertaken of the essays and questionnaire responses.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter begins with a discussion of the evaluation and categorization of the writing skills of the eleven second language composition students who participated in the study. For the purposes of reporting and analyzing the results of this study, students were classed as either skilled or unskilled writers. The criteria used for this classification consisted of comments and essay grades supplied by teachers, in addition to my own evaluations of students' essays. Following this section, the responses to the two questionnaires used during the two sets of interviews with the students are presented. After all interviews had been completed, each student's set of answers was compared to determine how closely anticipated and actual (as reported) progress agreed. Each section dealing with questionnaire responses, therefore, corresponds to a question, or set of questions, on the interview questionnaires and encompasses both sets of interview results.

#### Writing Evaluations and Categorization

As soon as all interviews were completed with students, I requested their teachers to supply me with brief assessments

of each student's writing ability and his or her particular problems and strengths in composing. I also asked for the grades students had received for the essays they had written between interviews and copies of those essays, which I then read and evaluated for myself. Using this information I divided the eleven students into two basic groups: skilled and unskilled writers.

The skilled group of writers basically included those students who wrote clearly and informatively despite some problems in language proficiency. I considered students to be unskilled writers if their writing was very simplistic, error-ridden, and/or lacking in communicative content. The reason for making separate judgments of students' writing ability in addition to soliciting teacher evaluations was to ensure a fair assessment of each student's general skill level. Most of these skill evaluations were fairly straightforward. In my opinion, however, Sam was a borderline student and I grouped him with the unskilled writers only after comparing his evaluation and grade with those of the other writers and reaching the conclusion that he probably belonged with the less skilled group. In summary, five of the students were finally designated as skilled writers: Abdul, Heng, Ann, Andy, and Mohammed. The remainder of the students differed sufficiently in their abilities from these five to indicate that they belonged in a lower skills level group; Ahmed, Lee, Sam, Tom, Tan, and Chin were accordingly designated as unskilled writers.

TABLE II

## TEACHER ASSESSMENTS OF STUDENT WRITING SKILLS

Student	Course/Section	Teacher Evaluations/Comments	Essay Grade
1. Abdul	1013.3	* Very good writer. Has a good grasp of grammar; good content	92
2. Ahmed	1013.3	Poor writer. Good content but severe problems with grammar, spelling, logic	82
3. Heng	1013.2	* Skilled writer. Some definite grammar problems; good control otherwise.	95
4. Ann	1013.3	* Good writer. High content; some problems with organization and presentation.	92
5. Andy	1013.6	* Very good writer. Some grammar problems but liked writing & wrote entertaining essays.	90
6. Lee	1323.7	Poor writer. Problems with language kept writing limited to simple sentences.	70
7. Sam	1013.6	Average writer. Grammar problems but content always good; best work on practical topics.	80
8. Mohammed	1013.6	* Excellent writer. Expressed self clearly and well.	95



TABLE II (Continued)

Student	Course/Section	Teacher Evaluations/Comments	Essay Grade
9. Tom	1013.3	Poor writer. Lots of ideas, but cannot do much with them. Major grammar problems.	82
10. Tony	1013.3	Poor writer. Organization okay; severe problems with grammar and communication.	78
11. Chin	1323.7	Average writer. Too many language problems to express thoughts well. Didn't like to write.	75

\* These 5 students were considered skilled writers; the other 6 were unskilled writers.

## Summaries of Student Responses

After completing all interviews, I transcribed my written record of the students' responses to the questionnaires into separate tables. The two sets of questions and responses from the interviews are presented in abbreviated versions in Tables III and IV (pages 45-48). The questions are given in a shorthand fashion and student responses are summed up in general terms using only a few words. The original wording and sense of students' replies is preserved as much as possible.

### Preparing and Beginning to Write

When students were asked how they usually began an essay and, later, how they had actually started the essay written between interviews, they gave a variety of different answers, both as a group and as individuals. Four general approaches seemed apparent, however, across the two sets of interviews: (1) outlining or listing ideas and arguments, (2) drafting a thesis statement, (3) simply beginning to write an introduction without preliminary (written) planning, and (4) free-writing ideas and arguments.

Only four students actually began their essays the same way that they had anticipated doing so. All the other students had altered their initial writing processes in some way from what they had reported as normal. Despite the fact that seven of the students had changed their anticipated processes, the four general approaches detailed

above were equally represented (proportionately) in both sets of student responses. In each interview, approximately one third of the students reported outlining, one third reported free-writing, and the remainder were more or less evenly divided between drafting thesis statements and writing unplanned introductions.

Of the unskilled writers, four had said they would outline first; only one of them (Tan) actually did so, however. Of the four students whose anticipated and actual processes did not change, three (Tom, Tan, and Chin) were unskilled writers. These are the only solid generalizations to be made about the unskilled writers, since otherwise their processes differed considerably. Lee (unskilled) was the only one of the eleven students to report that he wrote first in his native Chinese. Although he reported free-writing on the essay topic, instead of outlining, he still did so in Chinese first, translating the text into English later. Sam, who had said he usually listed ideas, did not even plan this much on the actual essay but began right away on his introduction. Ahmed, who had said he outlined first, ended up writing out his ideas and developing them into main body paragraphs before doing anything else. He was the only student describing this kind of free-writing.

The skilled writers divided up three ways. Ahmed and Mohammed seemed to share much the same type of approach to their writing. Both were regular free-writers, and

both ended up outlining their ideas after free-writing on the actual essay. Ann and Andy also had very similar responses to both questionnaires. Each had said that they usually drafted a thesis statement first, yet both had outlined or listed ideas when they actually began composing their essays. Heng, who normally began writing without much preparation, had written a thesis statement for this particular essay before beginning his introduction.

There was nearly unanimity on the question of which essay section students normally worked on first. Ten of the eleven writers stated that they always began with the introduction. But when the post-essay tallies came in, four of those same ten had, in fact, developed the main body of their essays first. All of the other students had begun working on their essay introductions first. Ahmed, who had originally been the sole student to anticipate writing his main body first, had reversed himself on this essay and developed the introduction first. Concerning these nearly uniform results, some significance should be placed on the fact that several students mentioned following standard essay organization when they described their order of essay development.

#### Research

Almost none of the students considered research to be a normal part of their essay writing processes. Only Ahmed and Mohammed said that they sometimes looked up

information on a subject in books or magazines, and Mohammed stressed that he did this only to find facts, not ideas. Four of the unskilled writers said they usually never did any research, and three of the skilled writers said that they only researched subjects once in a while. In the second set of interviews, the answers to this question were quite the opposite. Only three students (all unskilled) reported that they had done absolutely no research of any kind for their essay topic. All others reported some sort of information and idea gathering.

Tan and Lee, two unskilled writers, had previously said that they never researched topics. However, during the second set of interviews, both of them said that they had actually done quite a bit of research for their essays, seeking out books and articles of relevance to their subjects. Ahmed and Mohammed did what they had indicated was usual for them and looked into books or newspapers for extra information on their topics. Three of the skilled writers--Abdul, Heng, and Ann--mentioned talking to friends or other people this time, in addition to using written materials, in order to get some background and ideas for their essays. It is interesting to note the complete turnaround in students' responses to this question, especially since they were not all working on the same topic, or for the same teacher. Several classes were, however, involved with learning how to develop and present argumentative

essays at this time (such as discussing the pros and cons of political or economic issues). Perhaps this explains in part the tendency of the students to seek out information for this particular essay assignment.

#### Audience Considerations

During the pre-essay interviews, seven students said that they considered an audience for their essays. The other four stated that they didn't think about any audience at all. Interestingly, during the post-essay interviews, every one of the students responded to this question by saying that they had indeed written with an audience of some sort in mind. Six students named themselves or their teachers as the intended audience, the other five named specific groups (such as lawmakers). Since the teachers in the ESL composition program continually emphasize the need to consider audience during composing, it is difficult to assess whether students were merely echoing their teacher's instructions when they replied that they did consider audience, or whether they really imagined an objective readership for their compositions.

There were no consistent correspondences between audience consideration and composing abilities. All but one of the less skilled writers said that they would and actually did consider an audience, although they named only themselves or a teacher as the imagined reader. Ahmed,

alone of the poor writers, replied that he had expressly taken into account those readers holding opposing viewpoints to his own when he had written his essay. Three of the skilled writers, on the other hand, did name a specific readership for their essays. In general, the students did not appear to take the matter of audience consideration as an important part of their writing process. Their answers were usually quite preemptory and artificial, as if they were giving answers they thought were appropriate in view of their ongoing composition instruction. Their commitment to targeting and composing for a designated audience was very hard to ascertain.

#### Developing and Discovering Ideas

During the pre-essay interviews, over half of the students in this group said that they did not usually change or discover new ideas as they wrote. Others reported that they might add or delete ideas as writing progressed, but only two mentioned that they sometimes rethought or altered an original idea during the composing process. During the post-essay interview, seven students reported that they had not changed or discovered any ideas as they wrote. The other four had added some new ideas, but changed none. Three of the unskilled writers noted that they tried to stay as close as possible to their original outlines or essay plans, thus avoiding the introduction of new elements into their compositions once begun.

These results reflected an almost total lack of creative input during the actual composing process for both sets of writers, skilled and unskilled alike. The students made various comments which indicated to me that most of them were afraid of altering their ideas during writing, for fear of endangering essay organization. Some had had problems with producing correct SEO on previous essays and were obviously still not confident enough to change an essay which had been painstakingly outlined in advance along SEO lines.

#### Revision and Rewriting

Students' responses to the question of revision were similar to those concerning discovery of ideas inasmuch as they reflected a definite avoidance of manipulation of text or ideas during the writing process. During the pre-essay interview, only four students said that they sometimes revised or reorganized their essays during writing. None of the other students reported ever doing so. During the post-essay interviews, there were still only four reporting that they had altered their working drafts in any significant way. Again, none of the other students reported having done anything major in the way of revision to their essays as they wrote.

Surprisingly, Mohammed was the only skilled writer who reported reorganizing or revising during the composing process. The other three revisers in the post-essay interview



were all unskilled writers. Lee was perhaps the most interesting reviser. He had cut and pasted his drafts--four in all (including the final copy)-- and thrown out his second draft altogether. Tom, who said he had revised some of his essay, had written his first draft in pencil and all subsequent changes were made by erasing and rewriting on this draft. His final copy was simply a verbatim copy of the pencil version. Chin added more detail and reorganized slightly on his second draft, then copied that in ink.

These descriptions of revisions (or lack thereof) corresponded almost perfectly with the final tallies of students' total number of drafts made of the actual essay. In the first interview, every student but one had said that he or she usually wrote 2-3 drafts of an essay; only Chin had anticipated drafting his paper four times. In the second interview, eight students reported having made only two drafts of their essays (including the final copy). Only Lee, Mohammed, and Chin had made more. Chin and Mohammed had each made three copies and Lee made four copies. Without a doubt, for most of these students the original essay plan was fairly indicative of the final essay itself, and there did not appear to be much input of any importance once the essay had been initially planned.

#### Error Correction and Priorities

The consistency of student responses to this question in both interviews was extremely high. All of the students

in the study, except Heng, said that they were constantly aware of and correcting for grammatical problems as they wrote. These students seemed to work very hard on maintaining grammatical accuracy as they composed. Four even admitted that they did not usually recheck their work for correct grammar or vocabulary usage after completing their essays, feeling that they had adequately done so as they wrote.

All of the unskilled writers were continuously conscious of grammar as they wrote, with three of them not bothering to check their essays closely for errors after finishing. Heng, a skilled writer; was the only student of the eleven who said that he kept any grammatical concerns until he had gotten most of his ideas and arguments organized and on paper. The other four skilled writers described several different approaches. Abdul concentrated on grammar even as he outlined ideas. Ann said that she always focused on correct grammar and spelling but felt that she gave more time to getting her ideas written out. Andy re-read his writing continually in order to check on grammar, spelling, and vocabulary usage. Mohammed said that he used a limited vocabulary and always rechecked his grammar and spelling as he wrote. Because of his constant awareness of these factors, he said that he seldom re-read his essays in order to correct errors.

In answer to the second part of this question, concerning the students' priorities as they wrote, a seeming

contradiction occurred. All of the eleven students said that their primary object in beginning to write was the expression and organization of ideas. None of the students considered grammatical accuracy to be their highest priority during writing. Two of the unskilled writers, and one skilled writer, said, in fact, that ideas were most important, vocabulary second in importance, and grammatical aspects least important. These responses appear to be quite the opposite of those given to the first part of this question. Only Heng remained relatively consistent in his replies to both parts of this question. He had said that he only checked for grammatical problems after he wrote his ideas, and that his first priority as he began his essays was the expression of ideas and arguments.

Evidently, for these students the problem of writing correctly in English is a priority almost taken for granted as they sit down to begin an essay. With such a concern virtually automatic, they then appear to consider their first priority to be the expression of ideas. This seems to be the most logical explanation for the seeming paradox in many of their responses, and perhaps an interesting reminder of their position in regards to composing in a second, and incompletely acquired, language.

#### Experience and Background

Most of the students had had some sort of educational instruction in essay writing before coming to the United

States; most of this experience came from secondary schooling in their native countries. Only Ann and Tom said that they had never been taught how to write in any formal way before enrolling at O.S.U. For many of the students, especially Malaysians, the language of instruction in their countries differed from their native spoken dialects. All students in this kind of situation had accordingly been taught to write only in the formal language of the school, none had learned to write his or her spoken dialects. Only three students had ever written in English or any language other than that of their instruction previous to this time. Abdul had had an English pen pal when he was growing up and Mohammed had been well-educated in Arabic, French, and Italian and indicated that he had received composition training in all these languages at one time or another. Heng had attended an American high school for three years.

Heng's experience and background was somewhat different from the other students participating in this study. He was a Cantonese speaker educated in Vietnamese and had come to O.S.U. after graduating from an American high school which he had attended for three years. Even with this extensive exposure to the English language and composition practice, he had been hard-pressed to maintain acceptable standards in the regular English composition program at O.S.U. and had, therefore, enrolled in the composition program for non-native speakers.

TABLE III

## PRE-ESSAY QUESTIONNAIRE: SUMMARY OF STUDENT RESPONSES

Questions (abbreviated)	Abdul	Abmed	Heng	'Ann'	Andy	Lee	Sam	Mohammed	Tom	Tan	Chin
1. How do you usually begin to write on an essay?	free-writes ideas	outlines	writes intro.	thesis statement	thesis statement	outlines in L1	lists main arguments	free-writes, then outlines	writes intro.	outlines	free-write ideas
2. First section usually developed?	main body	intro.	intro.	intro.	intro.	intro.	intro.	intro.	intro.	intro,	intro.
3. Any research before or during essay writing?	not often	sometimes	no	not often	not often	no	never	sometimes	never	never	no
4. Specific reader/audience considered? Who?	no	yes teacher	no	yes teacher	yes teacher	yes teacher	no	no	yes general public	yes educated audience	yes teacher
5. Change or discover new ideas during essay writing?	not often	not often	very little	some ideas modified	adds or deletes ideas	not often	sometimes modify ideas	adds or deletes ideas	adds some ideas hesitates to change essay	rarely hesitates to change essay	almost never hesitates to change essay
6. Do you often/ever re-organize, revise, or rewrite your essays during composing?	not often	not often	almost never	sometimes	almost never	sometimes	almost never	revises some	some re-organization & revision	almost never	never

TABLE III (Continued)

Questions (abbreviated)	Abdul	Ahmed	Heng	Ann	Andy	Lee	Sam	Mohammed	Tom	Tan	Chin
7. How many drafts do you usually make (including final copy)?	2-3	2	2	2	2-3	3	2	2	2	2	4
8. (a) At what point do you usually begin to correct for grammar, spelling, etc...?	always aware	always aware	at end	always aware	always aware	always aware	always aware	checks grammar last	always checks grammar	always aware	always aware
(b) What is your first priority when you begin to compose?	vocabulary	express.	express.	express.	presenting ideas	express.	express.	express.	presentation of ideas	express.	express.
9. Any experience in essay writing in L1?	yes	yes	yes	none	yes	yes	yes	yes	very little	yes	none
What kind of experience?	secondary school pen pal	secondary school wrote stories	elem. school in homeland; US high school		secondary school	secondary school	secondary school	previous schooling & in 3 languages		secondary school	
10. Amount of extracurricular reading?	some	a lot	some	some	some	very little	very little	a lot	almost never	a lot	very little
What kind?	magazines	books & newspaper	magazines only	books & magazines	newspaper magazines	magazines	only mag.	magazine		books magazines	newspapers
What language?	L1 & L2	L1 & L2	L1 & L2	L1 & L2	L1 & L2	only L1	L1 & L2	L1 & L2		L1 & L2	L1

TABLE IV

POST-ESSAY QUESTIONNAIRE: SUMMARY OF STUDENT RESPONSES

Questions (abbreviated)	Abdul	Ahmed	Heng	Ann	Andy	Lee	Sam	Mohammed	Tom	Tan	Chin
1. How did you begin essay?	free-wrote ideas; then outlined	wrote ideas in paragraph	wrote thesis statement	outlined	listed ideas & arguments	free-wrote ideas in LI & translated	wrote intro.	free-wrote then outlined; then paragraphs	wrote intro.	outlined, wrote ideas & mainbody	free-wrote
2. First section developed	intro.	main body	intro.	main body	intro.	intro.	intro.	main body	intro.		intro.
3. Any research before or during essay writing? What kind?	some talked w. people; newspapers	some newspaper	yes talked w. friend	yes books	yes talked w. friends	yes books & articles	no	yes books	no	yes books	no
4. Specific reader, audience considered? Who?	yes teacher & self	yes those counter-arguments	yes lawmakers	yes teacher	yes intern'l students	yes teachers, students	yes teachers	yes those w/ opposite viewpoint	yes teacher	yes self	yes students
5. Any changed or new ideas while writing essay?	none	some new ideas	none	none	some new ideas	a few new ideas	none	several new ideas	none	yes, lots of new ideas	none
6. Did you reorganize, revise, or rewrite any of your essay while composing?	no	no	no	no	no	1st draft cut & pasted; 2nd-throw out completely	yes; changed intro. on last draft	yes; re-organized parts	no	no	yes; added detail & reorgan. 2nd draft

TABLE IV (Continued)

Questions (abbreviated)	Abdul	Ahmed	Heng	Ann	Andy	Lee	San	Mohammed	Tom	Tan	Chin
7. How many drafts (include final draft)?	2	2	2	2	2	4	2	3	2	2	3
8. (a) At what point did you begin to correct for grammar, spelling, etc?	from outline stage to end	always aware	after ideas written	all the time	all the time	all the time	checks grammar @ end	all the time	@ end of 1st draft	all the time	all the time
(b) What was your first priority as you began to write?	correct expression	vocab most important grammar second	correct writing	express.	express.	express.	ideas expressed correctly	good express. of ideas	expression	express.	vocab. & grammar
9. Did you do anything unusual or different from your usual writing habits this time?	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	no	yes	yes	yes	yes
What?	concluded with a question	considered audience		began with main body, instead of intro.	used indirect speech in intro.	did some research		changed 1st draft a lot	didn't outline, as usually does	didn't outline this time	considered an audience; gave more detail
10. Any comments on your composing processes?	wanted readers to think about his argument	no	no	no	no	no	no	had a lot to say on this topic	no	no	no



None of the unskilled writers had more than a standard secondary school exposure to controlled composition writing. The skilled writers, on the other hand, demonstrated a wide variety of background experiences ranging from multi-language training to no training whatsoever. Only two students said that they wrote for their own pleasure or purposes: Abdul, who wrote letters in English, and Ahmed, who wrote stories in his native Arabic.

### Reading

Responses to this question concerning extracurricular reading were extremely mixed. Although all of the skilled writers said that they read to some extent, only Mohammed said that he was an avid reader and Ann mentioned enjoying novels. Most of the reading for all of the eleven students consisted of newspapers, magazines, and occasionally Reader's Digest. Abdul explained that he preferred to spend time learning and playing music and songs (in both his native language and in English) and did not read a great deal for this reason. The skilled writers did not appear to favor one language for their reading over another.

Two of the unskilled writers, Ahmed and Tan, replied that they read books and magazines extensively. The four other unskilled writers, however, read either very little or almost never, and that mostly in their native languages. Except for these four, all the students reported reading both their native language and in English, with no real

indication whether they read more in one language than in another. Sam did say that he read in English for practicing reading skills, yet read almost nothing in his native language. I concluded from this, however, that his reading in both languages was minimal, since in no sense did he enjoy reading for its own sake. Tan mentioned that he was more inclined to read books in his native language and more superficial materials in English, but at no time did he state whether he read much more in his native language than in English.

#### Student Comments

Nearly all the students remarked that they had done something unusual or uncharacteristic of their regular composing processes when they worked on this particular essay assignment. Only two reported no deviations from their normal processes or techniques. These unusual practices varied from individual to individual: two had considered audience for the first time, two had forsaken their usual outlining stages, one had begun with the main body instead of the introduction, one had extensively rewritten his first draft, one had concluded his essay with a question, and one remarked that he had experimented with indirect speech in his introduction.

The most outstanding thing about these responses was that almost every student had experimented with a different composing strategy or rhetorical device. Five of the six

unskilled writers had noticed a change in their composing processes; Sam had noticed none at all. The skilled writers, once again, came up with a variety of answers. Abdul and Andy used new rhetorical devices (indirect speech and ending with a question), while Mohammed and Ann had altered their writing habits and Heng had made no major changes in his habits whatsoever.

When asked for more general comments on their essays or essay writing processes, only Abdul and Mohammed volunteered more information. Abdul commented that he had wanted his readers to think seriously about his arguments (as set forth in the éssay) and Mohammed noted that he felt that he had quite a bit to say on his chosen topic and had been interested in communicating that information in the composition. Most of the other students did not appear to reflect upon their writing or writing processes enough to really consider or comment upon them.

#### Summary

The diversity of the writing processes and habits described by this group of students makes it very difficult to characterize or categorize them as writers. Although some general tendencies did emerge from the two sets of responses, they were not extremely widespread or clear in their implications. Of the two types of writers, skilled and unskilled, perhaps the unskilled writers were the most homogeneous group, demonstrating similar behaviors in

several writing situations. Ahmed, however, was the exception to this rule. He appeared to be a distinctly different sort of writer from the other five unskilled writers, and shared more of the characteristics of the skilled writers than of any of his skills group.

Of the skilled writers, three separate sub-groups seemed to form, based on their responses. Abdul and Mohammed shared a great many writing habits, as did Ann and Andy. Heng, like Ahmed, was entirely different from his skilled companions and shared many more of the unskilled writers' behaviors than those of the skilled writers.

The extent to which each student's individual background, experience, and language proficiency contributed to his or her unique writing processes is almost impossible to ascertain. But the fact that these conditions do influence the second language writer's habits and abilities seems to be certain, judging from the variety and types of students' own comments on their writing processes.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The results of this investigation into the composing processes of eleven skilled and unskilled ESL students have led to a few general conclusions about how these students write in English. In addition, several aspects of second language composing appear to be worthy of closer and more detailed examination than was possible within the limits of this study.

#### Conclusions

The most striking aspect of the composing descriptions given by these students was the attitude they displayed towards their own writing behaviors. Although well aware of how they went about composing an essay, they did not give much consideration to the process of writing itself and its possible influence on their written products. A consistent dependence upon the clichés and axioms of the composition classroom went along with this lack of involvement with the writing process. Of all the aspects of essay production, standard essay organization was most often cited as a goal or guiding principle of any given writing behavior.

SEO serves as far more than a mere cliché for these writers; it is also a strong model for the students' writing processes. As such, it restrains and limits the writing processes and frustrates many of the creative aspects of composing.

The fact that 10 of the 11 students said that they would first develop their introduction during writing is an indication that SEO is a powerful guide for the writing process, besides being a measure of a finished essay's acceptability. One of the reasons that students explain their avoidance of reorganizing and revising an essay to incorporate or change ideas was their fear of disrupting the proper structure of their compositions, often worked out in great detail and with much effort at the start of the writing process.

Even though these students often avoided or minimized creative input in the middle of their composing, they spent a great deal of time and energy writing. Most of this effort seemed directed at establishing a plan for their essays, and the rest spent in struggling with the language to carry out that essay plan as best they could. Their restrained and limiting composing processes did not necessarily reflect an attitude of disinterest or dislike towards writing; rather it seemed to result from their understanding of how an essay should be constructed. These students, like Raimes' (1985) unskilled ESL writers, were quite committed to doing their assignments well and spent much effort in working

on those assignments. Few of the eleven students actively disliked writing, and most took their work quite seriously.

The most interesting discovery concerned the students' own perspectives on their writing priorities. They almost all spoke of the importance of expressing their thoughts clearly and well, but from other questionnaire responses and comments, it was obvious that they were constantly and acutely aware of grammar and vocabulary choices during the entire writing process. It is unclear whether their discussion of the importance of presenting ideas is partly an echo of the classroom, but most of them appeared to be sincerely occupied with communicating ideas.. The fact that several of the writers, most of them unskilled, did not even bother to rescan their papers for grammatical errors after they had completed the essay supports this conclusion. Evidently, the students felt that they had done their best with the language as they wrote it and were more concerned with expression than with perfection of form. It may be possible, as Raimes (1985) speculated about her unskilled ESL writers, that the students are not concerned with making mistakes:

Since they expect errors and do not see them as stigmatizing in the way that L1 errors are, they are not preoccupied with them. Instead, they concentrate on the challenge of finding the right words and sentences to express their meaning (195:247).

This tendency of ESL students to rank meaning and expression far above linguistic aspects was also reflected among Zamel's

(1983) advanced ESL writers, who consistently made the presentation of meaningful ideas a primary goal of their writing and relegated usage and form concerns to a lower level of importance.

It is virtually impossible to make broad generalizations about the characteristics of skilled and unskilled ESL writers from this small group of students. I was able only to discern a few similarities and tendencies among the students' varied behaviors, and none of these are without exceptions in the group. The diversity of the students' various writing processes reflects the complexity of linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds and experience of the students themselves. The resultant individuality of the processes described correspond closely with those observed by Raimes (1985), who also concluded that there were simply too many idiosyncratic writing behaviors among her unskilled writers for any major characterizations to be drawn from them. Although no clear picture can be formed of either skilled or unskilled ESL writers, a few shared behaviors and approaches to writing tasks were evident and associated with a certain level of skill.

Several of the unskilled writers demonstrated a tendency to share certain responses to certain writing tasks. These students followed the SEO model for composing rather closely, were not inclined to imagine specific readers for their work, did not read much as did skilled writers, and generally displayed less creativity in their processes than



other students. Ahmed, as already noted, was the exception to any generalization about the unskilled writers. He shared many more of the skilled writers' behaviors than the rest of the unskilled writers did. Although his writing reflected a deep interest in communicating ideas, it was seriously hindered in expressive ability by grammar problems and especially spelling errors, which were in abundance. Zamel (1983) found that some of her advanced ESL writers still refrained from correcting spelling errors even after having looked those words up in order to verify their correct usage. She concluded that "perhaps too much attention to meaning alone kept these students from carefully examining certain surface features of writing" (1983:176). This situation appears to be the problem in Ahmed's case, since he enjoyed writing in his native language but was so preoccupied with getting his meaning across in English that his essays were full of misspellings and basic grammatical errors.

In general, the skilled writers in this study were much more idiosyncratic in their composing processes than the unskilled writers, Abdul and Mohammed perhaps described the most creative approaches to their writing, while Ann and Andy shared many of the more restrained writing habits. Heng, like Ahmed, appeared to differ in many ways from his fellow skilled writers. His facility with the language itself allowed him to communicate quite clearly in his compositions, and he had minimal linguistic difficulties.

His composing process, however, was extremely limited and lacked much of the creativity of the other skilled writers. The skilled writers, as a group, did appear to read more than the unskilled writers. Of particular note was the fact that three of the skilled writers also mentioned talking to friends and other people as a form of research before beginning to work on a composition. Emig (1977) noted that "talking is a valuable, even necessary, form of pre-writing" (1977:123). This kind of pre-writing, however, is usually non-existent during classroom writing assignments.

Perhaps the most important conclusion of this study is that almost all of the ESL writers, regardless of classroom encouragement of creative composing processes, are still firmly entrenched in the belief that the final form of an essay, in so far as it exhibits standard essay organization, is equally a guide for composing an essay. The students still regard writing as a fairly linear, well-ordered process and although they realized that they often deviated from such an ideal process, they were determined to adhere to this pattern of composing at the expense of new ideas and alternative forms of expressing their thoughts. The need for these students to learn to examine their writing for problems in both presentation and grammatical form is also borne out by the study results, and the development of a critical eye for language detail is obviously essential for the successful writer.

### Suggestions for Further Research

Much more study needs to be made of ESL writers' composing processes, problems, and special requirements. A few particular areas of concern and curiosity, however, are immediately apparent. Almost no research into the transference of writing skills across languages (and cultures) seems to have been made, and this would appear to be a rich area of investigation for the future. Study of the native language composing skills of students (such as Ahmed and Heng) may reveal much about their special problems in learning to extend their ability in a non-native language.

A great deal more might be studied about the importance and effects of reading for the ESL writer, particularly reading in the second language. In consideration of the fact that much current research revolves around the connections between reading and writing (Smith 1983, Krashen 1984), this would be a prime focus for work with the second language learners struggling to acquire a new language and express themselves in it at the same time.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

PRE-ESSAY QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_  
Nationality: \_\_\_\_\_  
Native Language: \_\_\_\_\_  
Language(s) of Instruction: \_\_\_\_\_  
ESL Composition Class: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Describe how you usually begin to write on an essay.  
(outlining, free-writing, etc. . .)
2. What section of the essay do you usually develop first?  
(introduction, main body, etc. . .)
3. Do you usually research anything before beginning an  
essay? Describe.
4. Do you usually have a specific reader/audience in  
mind when you write? Who?
5. Do your ideas/opinions change as you write?  
Do you often get new ideas as you write?
6. Do you often/ever reorganize, revise, or rewrite your  
essay in the middle of composing?  
Describe.
7. How many drafts do you usually make before turning  
in an essay (including final copy)?
8. At what point in your writing do you usually begin  
to concentrate on correcting errors in grammar,  
spelling, mechanics, vocabulary choices, etc. . .?  
  
What is your first priority as you begin to write?
9. Have you had much supervised writing instruction in  
your native language? What kind?  
Have you ever written for your own pleasure in any  
language?
10. Do you read much? What?



APPENDIX B

POST-ESSAY QUESTIONNAIRE

Name:

Date:

1. Describe how you began to write on your essay.
2. How did you develop your essay; what section did you start on first?
3. Did you research anything for this essay? What?
4. Did you think of any specific audience/reader as you wrote? Who?
5. Did any of your ideas change as you wrote?  
Did you get any new ideas as you wrote?
6. Did you reorganize, revise, or rewrite your essay in any way as you wrote?  
Describe.
7. How many drafts did you make before turning in your essay (including the final copy)?
8. When did you begin to concentrate on grammar, spelling, mechanics, vocabulary choices, etc?  
  
What was your first priority as you began to write?
9. Did you do anything different this time from your usual writing habits, processes?  
Describe.
10. Any comments on your essay or your writing processes in general?

2  
VITA

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Master of Arts

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