

What the Pakistani L2 Writers Do When They Write: An Investigation of the Composing Processes of Pakistani L2 Writers

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Abstract

This paper presents a real account of what L2 writers do when they write. In Pakistan approach to teaching writing to students is always affected by unawareness of the writing processes of the students. This paper also attempts to address the writing processes of student writers considering some major problems of writing pedagogy in Pakistan: a heavy emphasis on linguistic accuracy; overlooking the development of students' writing ability; over-emphasis on the "product"; a lack of input of genre knowledge; and a lack of variety of assessment. Based on the discussion of current approaches to teaching writing, implications are introduced to improve writing instruction as well as enhance effective learning in Pakistani context.

Key words: process approach; product approach, teaching of writing, assessment of written products

I. Introduction

During the collection of data for the thesis of my PhD I had to encounter very interesting and sometime shocking remarks about the writing products of ESL students, for example I noted some of the remarks in my diary I hope they would be a source of information for us;" It is disappointing; it is terrible; it is ugly; I wish I could find one single grammatically correct sentence in their writing; they know nothing; all this mess, who is to blame?

It is acknowledged that writing is a complex process as it requires intense, active thinking throughout a continuous productive process in which thoughts and ideas are transferred into written communication, but not just words and letters on paper (Flower and Hayes, 1981). However, a large number of students "believe that writing is a natural gift rather than a learned skill" (Langan, 2000). They may add that they do not have the talent of writing. All such mythical assumptions together build a negative perception in students. Further some time negligence on the part of our instructional beliefs also helps accumulating such ideas. As a result, these students do not write and do not try their best to do so. But research shows that writing can be mastered through

practice, and all what it needs is special attention from both the teacher and students. In the age of Internet, information technology and globalization, writing in English has become so important. However, it seems that many ESL teachers in Pakistan still misunderstand the essence of the writing process. Many of them use traditional approaches based on memorizations and drilling. It is awfully upsetting that the curricula of English for intermediate students are full of such activities. Although such activities are important, they do not help as most learners are unable to produce short sentences, paragraphs and letters to friends.

Unfortunately, most of those who studied the writing processes of ESL learners such as ((Wolfersberger 2003; Bitchener & Basturkmen 2006; Hinkel 2004; Lee 2005; Mc Carthey, Gue & Cummins 2005; Martinez 2005; Silva 1993; Thorson 2000; Tetroe 1987; Matsumoto 1995; Schoonen et al. 2003; Kaplan 1966; Norment 1982; Scollon 1999; Mohan & Lo 1985; Hirose, 2003; Arndt 1987; Friedlander 1990; Woodall 2002; Wu, 1995; Wang & Wen, 2002; Flower & Hayes, 1985; and Congjun, 2002) focused on the problems of those students who had been either out in other countries or they were proficient writers. It is clear that these EFL writing scholars neglected exploring the writing processes of ESL learners in their native context. Focus, until recently, in the teaching of writing to ESL writers has been entirely on product. This study takes a preliminary look at the composing processes of five ESL Pakistani student writers.

Most of the Pakistani students are bilingual. Those who ever try to write in a non-standard variety of English, that is a source of irritation for the teachers and failure for the student writers. None has thus far looked at the writing processes of Pakistani student writers who learn English as L2. With my growing interest in process model of writing I decided to explore the writing processes of my ESL students and tried to look at what they do when they write.

2. Literature Review

Since 1980's studies of writers' cognitive processes have begun to focus upon nonnative speakers of English (Sperling, M., & Freedman S. W., 2001) in the beginning studies of the L2 writing processes were inspired by developments in LI writing research (Cumming, 1998, Hedgcock, 2005; Silva, 1993). According to Bambang Yudi Cahyono (2001) the studies of Kamimura (1996) and Edelsky (1982) investigated the relationship between writing in LI and L2. Kamimura (1996) investigated the writing processes of Japanese writer's narrative writing in Japanese and in English. The study questioned that whether good writers in Japanese were also good writers in English and the role that learner's proficiency in English played in their

composing in English. Study found that the Japanese and English writing was influenced by writer's English proficiency.

Zamel (1983) stressed upon the similarity of L1 and L2 writing process. She indicated that L2 writers both skilled and unskilled writers compose like the skilled and unskilled L1 writers. She claimed that composing is a non linear, explanatory and generative process (p.165). This claim supports Flower & Hayes (1981) claim that L1 writing is a non linear process.

Arndt (1987) examined six Chinese students composing academic written texts in both their L1 and L2 (English) Arndt found that the composing activities of each individual writer remained consistent across languages. Further, Raimes (1988, 1987) and Arndt (1987) observed some differences between L1 and L2 writing processes and among L2 writers.

Edelsky (1982) analyzed the relationship between first language and second language writing of young writers in a bilingual programme the texts written by the same children in Spanish and in English were analyzed. This study found that what a young writer knows about writing in the first language forms the basis of new hypotheses for writing in another language. Edelsky (1982) argued that certain L1 writing processes are used while writing in L2.

The researchers for example, Berg (1999) Coolk (1994) Hedgcock & Lefkowitz (1992) focused on the sub processes of L2 writing. According to Cumming (1998) the studies regarding students composing processes have described the specific aspects of writing behaviors in second languages.

Pianko (1979) was the first to look at differences between groups of writers. In looking at college students, she found that for most writers, there was no major reformulation of ideas. Most were concerned with cosmetic changes such as changes in words or sentences. When given a specific number of words, the specified length affected the students' composing processes. Pianko concluded that school-sponsored writing inhibits the writing process.

The studies which observed the differences between skilled and unskilled writers were initially conducted by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987), these studies found the writing behaviour of skilled and unskilled writers. These studies paved the way to L2 studies (Crabe & Kaplan, 1996). In their theory Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) claimed that the skilled and unskilled writers approach writing with different angles. While novice or unskilled writers follow a knowledge telling approach, expert or skilled writer take a knowledge transforming approach.

Various studies on the basis of the theory of Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) assumed that if skilled and unskilled L2 writers take different approaches to a writing task they can be expected to show different writing behaviours. Researchers for example Sasaki (2000) Xiu & Xia (2004) and Yang (2002) supported the model of

Bereiter and Scaradimalia (1987) and found differences between skilled and un skilled L2 writers. On the contrary some researchers for example, Raimes (1985) found no clear profile of the un skilled and skilled L2 writers. Arndt (1987) also did not find any significant behaviors of writing among a group of L2 writers.

Sommers (1980) in looking at revision strategies also looked at linear versus recursive writing processes. Here, revision was redefined as a sequence of changes in a composition--changes which are initiated by cues and occur continually throughout the writing of a work. Sommers identified four revision operations: (a) deletion, (b) substitution, (c) addition, and (d) reordering. Additionally, she identified four levels of changes: (a) word, (b) phrase, (c) sentence, and (d) theme. Inexperienced writers understood "the revision process as a rewording activity" (Sommers, 1980, p. 381) assuming that the meaning to be communicated was already there. On the other hand, experienced writers described revising "as finding the forms or shape of the argument" (Sommers, 1980, p. 384): their revision strategies were part of discovering meaning. While experienced writers used all levels of revision operations, inexperienced writers failed to use *reordering* and *addition*. Sommers noted that linear models of the writing process mimic speech models, thereby overlooking the recursive shaping of thought by language, and concludes that experienced writers are recursive. However, after reviewing other composing process studies, it is obvious what Sommers means by recursive is something more than simply rereading.

Perl (1980) echoes Sommers' sentiments about the real difference between skilled and unskilled writers in her study with writing teachers discovering their own writing processes. While recognizing the recursiveness in writing, she noted that different parts seemed to recur, with rereading being the most visible. Second, some key word or item is called up by the topic. Third, there is a felt *sense*, the move occurring inside the writer to what is physically felt, analogous for such terms as "inner voice" and feelings of "inspiration." Felt sense allows a writer to say or write something he has never said before. It is called up through the process of *retrospective structuring* bringing forward what is felt by using language in structured form. How well a writer uses retrospective structuring to tap his or her felt sense depends on what writing process model he or she has internalized. "Those who realize that writing can be a recursive process have an easier time with waiting, looking, and discovering" (Perl, 1980, p. 368). Essentially then, even though there are some elements of recursiveness in the writing of even the most unskilled writer, such recursiveness is surface level and done without engaging retrospective structuring and mimics the linear quality of speech.

Stallard (1976), in an earlier article, described the differences between transcribing and composing, noting the "view of composition that limits the process chiefly to transcription from thought to written process has ignored the key task facing any writer, the conceptualization, origination, or invention of the message to be

communicated" (Stallard, 1976, p. 182). This is the demarcation between a linear process and a recursive one: transcribing therefore corresponds to a linear process while composing corresponds to a recursive one.

The present study in the light of above mentioned studies would be helpful in examining the writing process of Pakistani ESL writers while writing in L2. Further the exploration of different sub processes involved in composing during writing in L2 is valuable and would allow us to develop an in depth understanding of these sub processes. It would also help us avoiding premature generalizations based on either L1 research or L2 research involving a typical method oriented findings of L2 writers. No doubt a number of studies on L2 writers are present but they represent different social, cultural and educational back grounds which do not have any generalized concern with a culture like in Pakistan. This study is an attempt to address the writing process of Pakistani ESL writers purely in a Pakistani context.

3. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to explore the writing processes of Pakistani L2 student writers during class writing done assignments with the help of the following research question:

- What the Pakistani L2 Writers Do When They Write?

4. Methodology

4.1 Participants

Selection of participants was limited to my FSc and Arts L2 student writers in my own class, to whom I taught English as a Compulsory Subject. These students were studying at a Higher Secondary Private School in Lahore, Pakistan at the time of the study. All of the participants were the final year student who had been studying both Urdu and English as compulsory subjects since the last 8 years. A range of writing abilities was included to determine if there were any differences between the writing processes of FSc students versus Arts (FA) writers.

A case study approach was used. All participants participated in the study voluntarily. To determine them as Low achievers and High Achievers a composition writing test was conducted. The topic was chosen from the syllabus of intermediate class Compulsory English recommended by The Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education.

4.2 Procedure

For the evaluation of the essays written by the participants Holistic Scoring Method was applied. The final scoring was divided into upper quartile division and lower quartile division. The upper quartile scores were considered as high scores and lower quartile scores were considered as low high scores. So among 5 students 3 were named as high achievers who fell in the upper quartile while 2 students who fell in lower quartile were considered as low achievers. Interestingly the FSc students secured highest marks in the essay while the Arts (FA) students got lowest marks.

Prior to the actual writing session the participants were provided instructions. Each of the participants was directed that he would write a short essay on a topic given by the researcher. At the time of observation, each of the participants was given an hour to complete a 500 word essay. No particular instructions regarding prewriting or revision were given. I observed each participant separately, for the most part acting simply as an observer and kept a running commentary of observable behavior such as rereading, pausing, and scratching out.

5. Results and Discussion

The least skilled writer in the study belonged to Arts section. He wrote 135 words in 60 minutes. He reread 40 times; he just looked at mechanical side of the essay during rereading. All changes he made were in punctuation and spelling. There was no evidence of prewriting.

The second writer from FSc group wrote 416 words in 60 minutes, he seemed to adopt an extensive mode of writing. The data revealed that he was indulged in making notes prior to writing; he spent 5 minutes on prewriting. It might be interpreted that he was recalling information, in spite of really indulging in any process of brainstorming or eliciting. He reread 14 times with all changes in punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary. Like Zamel's (1983) unskilled writer, he paused so often that she interrupted her own composing process and her piece suffered accordingly.

In the group of Arts students, the first writer wrote 294 words in 60 minutes. He indicated that he had been thinking about the topic in advance. He spent 10 minutes on prewriting, it seemed as if he was just spending time. She reread his essay almost 45 times. He spent most of his time on correcting punctuation, spellings, and vocabulary. His essay had a usage score of 20.8 (Brodkey & Young, 1981).

In the group of FSc students a student wrote about 477 words in 65 minutes. Before he began to write, he remarked that he hadn't really thought of anything to write. There was no evidence of any prewriting. During writing he reread 35 times; all

revisions consisted entirely of punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary. Like one of the writers in the low achievers group, all his revision did him little good.

In the group of FSc students, the participant wrote 388 words in 18 minutes, he spent 2 minutes on prewriting. He reread only 2 times while writing, he was asked questioned as to whether she usually wrote in this same manner, she stated that she wrote even long papers straight through, rarely making any major changes in her final version, only checking for errors. "I try to visualize it before I begin to write."

An other participant from the FSc group stated prior to writing that he liked the topic and he desired to write about it. It might be interpreted that he had already crammed this topic. Because in Pakistan the teachers' attention is focused on stereotypical questions set in the board examination; as a consequence, students do not practice writing sufficiently in the classroom. Siddiqui (2007, p. 164) rightly says that 'the students memorise ready made answers of short stories, essays, plays, poems etc because the assessment system encourages rote learning and the examination requires the students to reproduce what they have learnt by heart'.

A critical evaluation of the Lahore Board Examination's Past Papers discloses that the topics are repeatedly taken from the textbooks (prescribed books) of Matriculation. To quote Siddiqui (2007, p. 103) 'in Pakistan, the textbooks are supposed to occupy a central position in the process of teaching and learning to the extent that the assessment system and classroom teaching seem to revolve around the textbooks'. One noteworthy fact is that for the past 10 years, the textbook of Paper B (English Grammar and Composition) has not been revised or updated (Humera, 2011). Further in Pakistan students and teachers already know the syllabus so they do not make effort to write by themselves. This situation can be named as negative washback of Board Examinations in Pakistan. Hughes (1989, p. 1) defines washback 'as an effect of testing on teaching and learning'. According to Hughes (2003), a test could have either beneficial or harmful washback. A test has beneficial washback if it is based on the language needs of the learners, but if the test content and techniques are at variance with the objectives of the course, it is unreliable and likely to have harmful washback. Siddiqui (2007, p. 189) argues 'the negative washback effect on teaching is of two kinds: explicit and implicit. In the Pakistani context, the explicit effect is shown in the apparent tactics the teacher uses to help students get good grades. The implicit washback effect is the teacher's own view of teaching which gets contaminated by the hanging sword of memory-gearred tests. He wrote 456 words in 31 minutes, he reread eight times. While composing, he volunteered that he generally makes changes while he is writing.

Pakistani L2 writers, like other inexperienced writers, write using a linear process (Perl, 1979, 1980; Pianko, 1979; Sommers, 1980; Zamel, 1983). None of the writers made any organizational pattern for expressing their ideas, most of the writers from

both groups were concerned only with mechanics and superficial make up changes in their draft for example they only had concern with correct punctuation, spelling, and vocabulary. Further these student writers like the inexperienced Native American writers showed little or no evidence of any prior planning (Taylor, 1984), to some extent the students of FSc had an idea they wanted to express; that is, the writing merely served to transform thought into writing. They just transmitted their crammed ideas because in Pakistan FSc students are normally considered better in cramming than non Fsc students.

The FSc students were able to produce relatively better writing drafts in a short period of time due to the fact that they had already crammed all of the essays present in their text books, through their topic prior to writing (Taylor, 1984).

The syllabus prescribed by the Punjab text book board for English is, inadequate to produce the expertise needed to comfortably handle the demands of academic writing. In comparison to Pianko's (1979) traditional English students, the students from both FSc and Arts group did not exhibit a more fully developed understanding of what contributes to good writing. Like all of the writers studied, students of both groups were still concerned with sentence-level mechanics of writing.

Additionally, rereading does not necessarily signal recursiveness, or the shaping of language by thought, but rather seems to serve for all writers as a way of maintaining focus or keeping their train of thought. There was no evidence of either reordering or addition among any of the writers (Sommers, 1980). Only one student from FSc group seemed to have tapped his felt sense and used his retrospective structuring (Perl, 1980) to give an organizational pattern to his writing. Furthermore, the focus on errors of appearance rather than discovery of meaning by inexperienced writers indicates transcription rather than composing (Stallard, 1976). Teaching Pakistani L2 learners a linear writing process becomes a constraint for their search for meaning in their own writing.

- i) Both the teachers and students should promote words in their treatment with writing for example; 'experimentation', 'risk taking', 'problem solving' or 'intuition' which are commonly used for creativity in a western educational context.
- ii) Whatever approach writing instructors take with these learners that approach must assist students in discovering what they mean first through the reshaping of language by thought.
- iii) Therefore, the text books at intermediate level need to address analysis skills and conceptualization in writing as well as traditional writing skills.
- iv) Learners must be allowed to evolve their own solutions through repeated exploration of the same problem.

- v) Writing teachers must consider that ‘creativity flourishes where there is a systematic strategy to promote it’ (Robinson, 2001, p. 12). In addition, they must suggest approaches to teaching such as the genre approach or the process approach for developing creative writing.
- vi) The pupils do not themselves decide the topics; instead, the teacher presents a topic or a theme. The teacher is the only audience for whom the students write. The teacher implicitly or explicitly dictates the form. So the learner must be facilitated to decide the topic wherever possible.
- vii) The teacher judges the pupils’ writings as the finished product. I believe that the teacher must change their attitude towards the writing of the learners.
- viii) They must consider the process despite of the product. Error free writing should not be idealized and they must make difference between error and mistake.
- ix) English teachers must be encouraged to engage in activities that are essential for creativity, such as risk taking and viewing of their own learning.
- x) English teachers can also arouse the learners’ interest in creative writing, so that their works will be published in a school magazine; it is potentially futile to continue writing unless there are intrinsic rewards in the process.
- xi) Finally, the school timetable should give importance to creative writing.

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