The Writing Processes of Long-Term English Learners and Struggling Native English Speakers

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Abstract

This study sought to identify what differences, if any, distinguish the writing processes of native
English speakers (NESs) and long-term English learners (LTELs). During a 90-minute class
period, 9th and 11th grade NES and LTEL students recorded themselves thinking aloud as they
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their writing processes and their levels of attention to different aspects of the writing process.
LTELs answered additional questions about their language backgrounds and their use of their
languages as they write. Several English teachers also scored the students' essays. Analysis of
the results suggests many similarities between the students' writing processes, such as limited
planning, limited self-regulatory activities, and frequent surface editing. One important
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Keywords: Long-term English learner, native English speaker, struggling writer, writing
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The Writing Processes of Long-Term English Learners and Struggling Native English Speakers

One phenomenon that has emerged in the United States public school setting is that of long-term English learners (LTELs). These students have spent more than six years as language learners in US schools, yet they still struggle to attain English proficiency (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2002; Olsen, 2014). LTELs may have a mixed relationship with their first languages and with their status as English learners, and may reject that label altogether (Matsuda, Cox, Jordan, & Ortmeier-Hooper, 2006). LTELs may have limited or no literacy skills in their first language (Menken, Kleyn, & Chae, 2012). Writing often presents a challenge for these students, even when they are literate only in English (Freeman, Freeman, & Mercuri, 2003; Menken, Kleyn, & Chae, 2012; Ortmeier-Hooper, 2013).

Since general education English language arts (ELA) classes may often include both native English speakers (NESs) and LTELs, teachers may be tempted to address both groups as one unit, especially if they lack knowledge of the differences in the needs of these two groups; indeed, teachers may not even realize that LTELs are English learners at all (Olsen, 2014). While many studies address the instructional needs of struggling NES writers, fewer studies address the needs of secondary ELs as writers, and very few studies indeed address LTELs' needs as writers. Yet evidence suggests that L2 writing in general differs from L1 writing (Harklau & Pinnow, 2009; Silva, 1993), and that the writing of LTELs is distinct from the writing of newer English learners and of L1 writers (Doolan, 2014); it seems possible that the composing processes of unskilled NES and LTEL writers may also differ, and that a greater understanding of those differences will help teachers to better meet the needs of their LTEL students.

Common areas of weakness for struggling NES writers include knowledge of aspects of writing (Graham, 2006; Milliano et al., 2012); planning (Graham, 2006; Graham & Harris, 2002; Milliano et al., 2012); and revising (Graham, 2006; Graham & Harris, 2002; Milliano et al., 2012). Struggling writers may engage in fewer self-regulatory activities (Milliano et al., 2012). Rather than focusing on recording ideas, struggling writers focus more on spelling and grammar as they work, and they may not stop writing to reread or reflect on what they have written (Faigley, Cherry, Jolliffee, & Skinner, 1985). They are often uninterested in (Tompkins, 2002) or apprehensive about (Daly, 1978) writing, and may seek to avoid writing.

Due to its complex nature, writing is often a particularly difficult skill for ELs to acquire (Ortmeier-Hooper, 2013). Researchers have identified a variety of strategies that writers use as they compose in their second languages: prewriting in L1 (Baruca, 2010; Chelala, 1981; Kim & Yoon, 2014); code switching (Chelala, 1981), or shifting between languages within a specific exchange, and translanguaging (Velasco & Garcia, 2014), or integrating multiple languages to communicate; and translating (Kim & Yoon, 2014). A variety of studies have suggested that linguistic competence does not correspond with composing competence (Krapels, 1990; Raimes, 1987). Because students who go on to become LTELs often enter U.S. schools at a young age, they may not develop literacy skills in their first languages as they become literate in English.

Struggling writers tend to benefit from direct, explicit instruction on writing strategies, partly because this kind of instruction makes hidden processes more accessible (Graham, Harris, & MacArthur, 2006). Evidence also suggests that struggling writers benefit from improved self-regulation as they write (Lin et al., 2007).

Research Question

Does the writing process differ for long-term English learners and struggling native English speakers in an untimed persuasive writing activity? If so, what is the nature of the difference?

Research Method

Participants

Participants in the research included an English Learners teacher at a rural high school in a Mid-Atlantic state, three general education English language arts (ELA) teachers, and two groups of students from the same high school: three Latinx Long-Term English Learner (LTEL) students, identified as students A, C, and E; and three native English speakers (NES) who struggle with writing, identified as students B, D, and F.

There were two criteria for NES inclusion in this study: below proficient scores on the 8th grade state standards of learning tests, and identification by their teachers as struggling writers. The teacher-researcher used written samples from a 9th and an 11th grade English class to identify low-scoring (a score of 8 or lower) essays. Native English speakers whose work received a score of 8 or more out of 12 possible points were excluded from the study.

Students with identified learning disabilities and 504 plans were excluded from the data.

Apparatus

Writing prompt. The teacher-researcher cooperated with two general education English teachers in the school. Each general education teacher created or chose a persuasive writing prompt for students as a way to collect a beginning-of-semester writing sample.

Video and audio recording application. The students recorded their writing sessions with video editing software called WeVideo. The WeVideo extension allowed students to record

both their voices and the work on their screens. The recordings also allowed the

teacher-researcher to review the types of changes that the students made as they worked.

The teacher-researcher chose to use a think-aloud protocol, even though some researchers

have wondered if this protocol may interfere with writers' composing process (Faigley & Witte,

1981). The teacher-researcher wanted information about the decisions that writers make as they

make them, information that cannot be gained through interviews or surveys. Additionally,

available research studies on think-aloud protocols suggest that it does not change the outcome

of the task in question (Ericsson & Simon, 1980; Leow & Morgan-Short, 2004).

Surveys. Students completed a survey after completing the writing task. The survey

included a free-response question in which students described their writing process and several

Likert-type questions, using a scale of "never" to "always," regarding how often they think about

different aspects of writing.

One question asked students to identify which language or languages they knew fluently;

if multiple languages were identified, students were then directed to answer additional questions.

The additional questions for multilingual students yielded specific information about those

students' language backgrounds and their perceptions about the influence of multilingualism on

their writing processes. Data from multilingual students who were not identified as LTELs, such

as NESs who had studied another language or formerly limited English proficient (FLEP)

students, were excluded from the study.

Student essays. Each student wrote an essay, which three general education English

teachers at the school later scored. All teachers used the state-published writing rubric as the

scoring tool.

Procedures

The general education English teachers assigned their 9th and 11th grade students a persuasive writing task in order to collect a writing sample from each student. The teacher-researcher visited the two classes to explain to students the procedures they would be following. Due to the unfamiliarity of a think-aloud procedure, and in order to put students at greater ease with the procedure, the teacher-researcher gave students five minutes to practice a think-aloud with a partner. The teacher-researcher emphasized that the quality of the final written product, while significant, was less important to the research than the student's writing process.

Students spent the remainder of the class period, approximately an hour, on planning, composing, and revising a persuasive essay. As students wrote, they used WeVideo to create an audio and visual think-aloud recording of their writing process. Students had access to any accommodations they would ordinarily receive on state standardized tests, such as bilingual or English-language dictionaries. Although both English teachers told their classes that they could use more time the next day in class if needed, only one of the study participants (Student E) returned to her draft for a second writing session. In both classes, students received some form of coaching about essay structure.

Immediately after finishing their writing, all students in the class also completed a paper survey that included questions related to students' writing processes. All students specified what languages they knew fluently. Any self-identified multilingual students also answered additional questions relating to their language backgrounds and their perceived use of their languages to

write. This question allowed the teacher-researcher to confirm that all of the native English speakers were monolingual.

The teacher-researcher then asked three general education ELA teachers to score the writing from the students included in the survey. She also transcribed and analyzed the recorded think-alouds and the surveys of the LTELs and struggling NESs.

Results

Think-aloud data. Although many of the students in both classes expressed apprehension about recording themselves, the students worked hard on their writing. The students often found it difficult to remember to keep talking, but their recorded writing sessions yield substantial information about how each of the students thinks about writing.

Student A, an LTEL, struggled to relate to the prompt and to generate ideas. His recording shows more repetition than the other students: he repeated words as he typed, usually before and after he finished typing the word. He also often reread phrases to himself as a refocusing tool. He also reread his draft, which resulted in one added phrase.

Student B, an NES, generated a fluent recording, with short, infrequent breaks in her composing. Her composition was a linear process, featuring the smallest number of edits and no rereading. When she took breaks, it was usually to talk with another student.

Student C, an LTEL, created the longest recording (46:44), and also spent the most time pausing (20:22). Student C's writing session featured long, frequent pauses. He did more rehearsing and more rewording than any other participant; he also did the most revising of any student, writing several sentences to give additional support to his opinions. His was the only recording that included output in both of his languages. Student C worked alongside a second

English learner who was composing in Spanish, and Student C's recording contains many side comments in Spanish to his classmate. Some of these comments relate to his writing, and some do not. The recording also contains several instances of code switching: "La soccer or like si quitaron la soccer de la escuela" (*Soccer or like if they got rid of soccer from the school*), he remarked, as he thought about what to write; "Mi paragraphs tan chiquitas, mira" (*My paragraphs are so small, look*).

Student D, an NES, generated a relatively fluent recording, although he struggled to generate ideas. Other than Student A, Student D was the only writer who reread his entire draft after finishing it. He made the fewest self-edits of the four student participants, and no revisions. There is no real conclusion to his writing session. Instead, he stopped writing for a long period of time, so that a section at the end of the recording consists of his conversation with the students around him. He finally remarked, "I'm done. I have to be," and ended the recording.

Student E, an LTEL, began the session by asking a classmate what to write about, and initially wrote, "I dont [*sic*] know what to write or what to say." Student E did add more to her essay at a later date, producing several paragraphs. However, she did not record the second writing session, so no additional data about her process are available.

Student F, an NES, was outwardly skeptical of the think-aloud process. He said very little as he wrote.The teacher-researcher later discovered that he had not recorded a think-aloud; Student F submitted a video of a student solving climate change-related word problems. Student F was the only participant who never submitted an essay, even an incomplete one. The teacher-researcher has some history with Student F, as Student F was involved in a fight with a newcomer EL the previous year, and the teacher-researcher interpreted for the newcomer.

All of the students in both groups paid diligent attention to surface editing (see Table 1). The students generated some of these edits themselves, and they also made frequent use of the computer's spell-check. Revisions, or significant changes to meaning or structure, were far less frequent.

Table 1

Types and Frequency of Students' Changes to Writing

		Student-Generated Changes			Spell-checks
Student	Total Edits	Types of Edits (Frequency)	Total Revisions	Types of Revisions (Frequency)	
A	25	Spelling (19) Add punctuation (3) Capitalize (1) Add word (1)	1	Add phrase (1)	36
B	15	Spelling (10) Add punctuation (3) Reword (2)	0	—	16
C	25	Add word (9) Reword (9) Spelling (4) Remove capital letter (2) Add punctuation (1)	1	Add phrase (1)	11
D	17	Spelling (11) Add word (2) Add punctuation (2) Reword (2)	0	—	19

Note: A revision indicates a substantial change to meaning, rather than a surface correction to grammar or spelling.

A second similarity across recordings was a lack of self-regulatory remarks. All students' recordings consisted primarily of dictating their writing, with only one or two self-regulatory comments. There were a few examples of metalinguistic comments, however. The students often directed these remarks at their classmates. Most of Student A's remarks related to how much he had written. He commented to himself, "Come on, I need some more." Student B remarked to a classmate, "I spell so many words wrong. I forget apostrophes." Student C's recording included side conversation in Spanish with a Spanish-speaking EL classmate. Many of the remarks did not relate to either student's writing, but some did. However, Student C also made one metalinguistic comment after he was alone, which was also in Spanish: "Así escribiera trophy?" *(Is this how I would write trophy?)*

Survey data. The students' survey responses yielded more information about the students' perceptions of their writing processes. The think-aloud data confirm some of these perceptions, and contradict other perceptions.

Attention to writing tasks. The second section of the survey asked students how much they think about different elements of writing. Students rated each element on a Likert scale (see Table 2).

As a whole, the NESs indicated equal or greater attention than the LTELs to every element included in the scale. Collectively, the LTELs indicated that they gave most attention to spelling and the least attention to their audience; the NESs indicated that they thought most about grammar and spelling, and least about audience and finishing the task quickly. The frequency of spelling corrections during the writing sessions would support the students' claim that they think often about spelling.

Table 2

Student Perceptions of Attention to Aspects of Their Writing Processes

Student	Word Choice	Audience	Finishing Quickly	Grammar	Spelling	Topic Knowledge
LTEL						
A	2	0	2	1	2	0
C	1	1	1	2	2	2
E	1	0	1	1	1	1
Mean	1.3	0.3	1.3	1.3	1.7	1.0
NES						
B	2	3	1	3	3	2
D	2	0	1	2	2	1
F	1	1	2	2	2	2
Mean	1.7	1.3	1.3	2.3	2.3	1.7

Note: 0 = I never think about this; 3 = I almost always think about this

Student descriptions of writing process. The first question of the survey said, "When you have a new writing assignment, how do you complete it? What steps do you take?" All six student participants wrote very brief responses (see Table 3). Several of the responses directly contradict the students' writing session. Two students, C and D, refer to specific prewriting strategies. However, neither student appeared to use prewriting strategies during their composing session. Student B also referred to thinking before writing, but again, her recording includes minimal planning or rehearsing of ideas. Student B mentions revising, yet she never rereads her work.

Table 3

Students' Descriptions of Their Writing Processes

Student	Student Response
A	I complete it by looking over it. I look over for a while then I turn it in.
B	I think about what I wanna write then I do it. then revise, then turn in.
C	I make a web to make the writing easier.
D	I have help completing it and problem solving Brain storm
E	Well first before anything I just think about what the topic is and think about whats more appropriate to write.
F	Use what i've always been taught.

Note: This table retains students' original spelling and grammar.

Student languages. The third section of the survey asked students to identify which

languages they knew fluently.

LTEL language backgrounds. Only the LTELs responded to the final two sections of

the survey. The fourth section of the survey asked the LTELs about their language backgrounds.

All three students indicated that they consider Spanish to be their first language, and that they

begin learning English at or by the age of 6. All three students rated their ability to write in

Spanish as equal to or higher than their ability to write in English, although none of the students

has received schooling in any language other than English.

LTEL use of language. Finally, the LTELs used Likert scales to describe their use of

languages during writing (see Table 4). This question yielded contradictory answers. For

example, Student A neither agreed nor disagreed that he uses only one language to write, yet he

agreed that he uses his L1 and strongly agreed that he uses his L2 as he writes. Student C

strongly agreed that he uses just one language to write, but was unsure of whether he thinks in

L1 or L2 to write.

Table 4

Students' Perceptions of Language Use During Writing

Student	Use one language to write	Think in L1 while writing	Think in L2 while writing	Use L1 more than L2
A	3	4	5	4
C	5	not sure	not sure	2
E	4	3	3	3

Note: 1 = Strongly disagree; 5 = strongly agree.

Student essays. Three general education English teachers at the school scored the

students' essays using the current state scoring rubric. The essay scores appear in Table 5, as

well as the teacher-researcher's original scores. There were significant discrepancies between the

scores; of the three writers, Student C received the highest scores, and Students A and D received

some of the lowest.

Table 5

Teacher-Assigned Scores of Student Essays

Scorer	Student				
Teacher-Researcher	A	B	C	D	E
Composing and Expression	1	2	2	2	2
Usage and Mechanics	2	2	3	2	1
Total Score	**4**	**6**	**7**	**6**	**5**
Teacher 1					
Composing and Expression	1	2	3	1	3
Usage and Mechanics	2	2	3	2	2
Total Score	**4**	**6**	**9**	**4**	**8**
Teacher 2					
Composing and Expression	2	2	2	2	2
Usage and Mechanics	2	3	3	3	2
Total Score	**6**	**7**	**7**	**7**	**6**
Teacher 3					
Composing and Expression	1	2	2	1	2
Usage and Mechanics	2	3	3	1	1
Total Score	**4**	**7**	**7**	**3**	**5**

Note: Total scores appear in bold. To calculate the total score, multiply the Composing and Expression score by two, and then add the Usage and Mechanics score. Nine or higher is a passing score.

Discussion

Overall, there were many similarities between the composing processes and the perceptions of the NES students and the LTELs: Both groups of students did little planning or revising; both groups of students focused their editing efforts on spelling and minor grammatical errors; both groups indicated that they think primarily about spelling and grammar as they write; both groups exhibited few self-regulatory behaviors. Only one of the students achieved a passing score from one teacher. In short, both the NESs and the LTELs both demonstrated many behaviors that affirm the findings of earlier researchers: a general lack of planning (Perl, 1979; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987), a lack of metalanguage, which may indicate a lack of familiarity with their own cognitive processes (Lin et al., 2007), and editing that focused heavily on correcting spelling and grammar (Gibbons, 2015; Perl, 1979; Raimes, 1985; Silva, 1993; Trang & Hoa, 2008; Zamel, 1983).

A key difference between the recordings of the LTELs and the NESs was Student C's use of code switching, or shifting between multiple languages. This finding is similar to that of Chelala (1981), whose writers used code switching to support their writing. While instances of code switching are few, Student C spent at least some of his composing session thinking in Spanish about his writing. It seems significant that, in spite of receiving no L1 schooling, and in spite of 12 years of English-only education, Student C still drew on his Spanish as he composed.

Limitations

One limitation on this study is the students' lack of familiarity with the think-aloud protocol. It is possible that additional practice with think-alouds would have increased the students' level of comfort with the protocol, and thus yielded different results.

Another limitation is the nature of the teacher-researcher's relationships with the student participants. All three LTEL students have established relationships with the teacher-researcher. Only one of the NES students knew the teacher-researcher at all, and that relationship was not a positive one. The difference in relationships between teacher-researcher and participants may well have affected the students' willingness to talk about their writing, and consequently may have affected the data that the teacher-researcher collected.

Implications for Professional Practice

This research has several implications for teachers and students alike. The first relates to code switching. A growing body of research suggests that bilingual writers benefit from using all of their existing language skills, rather than skills from just one language (Hornberger, 2005). One of the LTELs thought aloud in English, and one thought in a combination of his languages. If their teachers can validate both languages, these students may feel more comfortable with and interested in writing, regardless of the language they choose to work in. Teachers more often encourage newly-arrived ELs to use their first languages, but LTELs may not receive that same support in relation to their L1. English teachers in particular may benefit from guidance about how to support their LTELs in this regard, if the LTELs are willing to draw on their L1 in an academic setting. Teachers, beginning in early elementary school, can support this kind of code switching, and that support should continue throughout a student's schooling, in order for language learners to understand that code switching is not a negative activity. Encouragement of code switching might require a paradigm shift for teachers, if teachers perceive code switching as a crutch for English learners.

All of the student participants in this study may benefit from learning more about the processes of more skilled writers. Listening to other writers' think-alouds, or reading skilled writers' descriptions of their processes, may help these struggling writers to understand and think about other aspects of writing beyond spelling and grammar, as well as increasing their interest in writing. Teachers of struggling writers can use think-alouds in their own classrooms to model for students the processes that more skilled writers use as they compose. Modeling the process gives struggling writers the chance to observe a process that is usually hidden, and that they may never see.

The scale of this study is too small to yield generalizable results, but further research on this question would benefit struggling writers, both NESs and LTELs, and their teachers. An increased understanding of the processes of these two groups of writers will make it easier to offer them effective instruction, and ultimately help them become more proficient writers. In particular, learning more about the LTELs' writing processes will help teachers identify practices that will benefit this population.

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