FLOW

Foreign Language Opportunities in Writing

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SELF-REPORTED PROBLEMS OF L1 AND L2 COLLEGE WRITERS: WHAT CAN WRITING INSTRUCTORS DO*?*

Abstract

Understanding self-reported problems of L1 and L2 writers regarding the writing process holds important pedagogical implications for instructors to address their students' specific writing needs. L2 writers were usually reported to have more difficulty setting goals and generating material, and to produce less accurate and effective texts (Leki, 1992; Silva 1993, 1997). This paper compares the self-reported writing difficulties of two groups: L1 (N=19) and L2 (N=19)[1] freshman composition students from an American university. To analyze the group differences, a questionnaire (using 5-point Likert scale) about the perceptions of writing difficulties and approaches to writing process was used. Findings from the descriptive statistical analysis suggest that despite self-reported common problems, such as keeping clarity by using appropriate syntax, the L1 and L2 students presented different views on the importance of visuals in a text. While L1s find visuals to be least important for the reader to understand the text, L2s find visuals to be most important. The results reveal that although instructors focus on teaching essay organization, both L1 and L2 students need more instruction on creating better sentence structures. Encouraging L2 students to use visuals (pictures and graphs) in their persuasive essays would prove beneficial for them to overcome writing problems in English.

1. Introduction

Since the 1980s, a number of studies have appeared discussing teachers' efforts to understand second language (L2) writing. As a teacher of academic writing, I have had the opportunity to observe both L1 and L2 students expressing themselves in English, and I have perceived certain linguistic and non-linguistic factors (context and audience awareness) influencing the organization of student written discourse. Studies usually examine teachers' comments on student

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[1] L1 refers to native speakers of English (hereafter: NES), and L2 refers to non-native English speakers (hereafter NNES).

writing, but they rarely examine student self-reported problems when composing in English. In order to examine whether the problems that students face when composing in English are a result of their first language and educational background, this study was designed to identify and analyze the self-reported problems both L1 and L2 writers face in composing texts.

Since L2 writing practices have been assumed by some scholars to be borrowed from L1 writing practices, it has been expected that there are universal problems facing both L1s and L2s when writing in English. However, some scholars (Silva, 1993; Connor, 1996) present findings of various studies which show clear differences in the writing process of L1s and L2s. Understanding the differences of problems of L1 (NES) and L2 (NNES) writers, and the uniqueness of answers within groups is very important, so that teachers of writing can properly address writers' specific needs. The studies done so far usually revolve around the following issues:

1. linguistic structures
2. content
3. organizational patterns
4. text functions
5. writing processes
6. genres and contexts of writing

This research examines what students tell us about the issues mentioned above and whether they perceive them as problems in writing. It also explores how the findings can support our teaching. Two methods have been applied in this research: 1) observation and 2) distribution of a questionnaire which students filled out anonymously followed by questionnaire data analysis.

This paper opens with the research questions. Then, it overviews studies done in L1 and L2 writing, and it explains the methodology used. Moreover, it elaborates on the statements/questions the questionnaire contains; it then presents the statistical methods applied in the analysis, and summarizes the similarities and differences in the responses between the respondent groups. The rationale behind the questionnaire was to examine and present students' views about problems in composing. Studies usually examine teachers' feedback and comments on student writing, but they rarely examine whether students and teachers find the same areas problematic in writing.

2. Research questions

The study was designed to provide preliminary answers to the following research questions:

1. Are there self-reported universal problems in academic writing facing undergraduate students at an American university, classified in two groups: L1s (NESs) and L2s (NNESs)?
2. Are there any differences regarding problematic areas in writing when comparing:
   a) he answers of the L1 and L2 writers;
   b) the answers of the L2s with different language backgrounds?
3. Are students able to identify the problems they are experiencing in writing by themselves?

If universal problems exist, I perceive the reasons for their existence in the fact that both L1s and L2s follow North American writing models. Another reason is the globalization and use of English in correspondence and professional communication. The statistics show that the goal of the majority of international students studying in the US is to continue their career in the US (American University Career Center), where the structures typical of North American academic writing are required. On the other hand, if differences exist, they may result from students' different perceptions of organizational patterns due to different training in writing, as Hyland (2003) states, "Students obviously bring to the L2 writing class different writing experiences, different aptitudes and levels of motivation; they have varying metacognitive knowledge of their L1 and experience of using it, particularly to write; and they have different characteristics in terms of age, sex, and socioeconomic status" (32).

Hyland (2003: 36) summarizes the findings presented in the studies by Silva (review of studies 1993, 1997), Krapels (1990) and Leki (1992). The findings, focusing on the similarities and differences of L1 and L2 writing, show the following: (1) "General composing process patterns seem largely similar in L1 and L2," (2) "Both L1 and L2 skilled writers compose differently from novices," (3) "Advanced L2 writers are handicapped more by a lack of composing competence than a lack of linguistic competence. The opposite is true for lower proficiency learners," (4) "L1 writing strategies may or may not be transferred to L2 contexts," (5) "L2 writers tend to plan less than L1 writers," (6) "L2 writers have more difficulty setting goals and generating material," (7) "L2 writers are less fluent, and produce less accurate and effective texts," and (8) "L2 writers are less inhibited by teacher-editing and feedback."

My study explores whether L2 students perceive themselves as having the same problems that scholars report in their studies. If the nature of differences in

problems in writing between L1s and L2s is fully understood and explicated, that would help teachers develop strategies to help students alleviate those problems.

3. Literature review

The appearance and development of discourse analysis, referring both to spoken and written discourse, in the past twenty years, in particular, has inspired ways for re-examining many issues in education and foreign language study. It has also been used in resolving issues in better communication and student-teacher understanding, peer cooperation when learning, methods for studying foreign languages through writing, developing writing techniques, and finally, raising the awareness for various genres and the audience that the writer/speaker addresses. Furthermore, discourse analysis helps to detect and analyze the relations between language and society, and language and mind (sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics). Contrastive rhetoric is another discipline which completes the studies aiming to explore and compare devices that speakers and writers in a language use to express their ideas coherently, to unite the elements in a text and to present information in line with the conventions in their cultures. This section provides an overview of the research done in written discourse analysis and contrastive rhetoric.

Kaplan (1966) studied paragraph organization in essays by five groups of students and proposed the often critiqued five models of organizing a paragraph: English, Semitic, Romance, Russian and Oriental. In 1980, Ostler did the first study contrasting essays written in English by students whose mother tongue is Arabic to essays written in English by native speakers. Mahmoud (1982) found out that Arabic native speakers exhibited less paragraphing, a looser structure (introduction, discussion, conclusion), and less variety and more errors in the use of conjunctive elements. Scarcella (1984) analyzed 110 essays (30 native English and 80 non-native English). The NNESs studied English as a second language at colleges outside the US, and were divided into two proficiency groups (beginning and advanced) and four first language groups (Japanese, Korean, Romance, and Taiwanese). Scarcella compared these essays to essays written by American students whose mother tongue is English, drawing the conclusion that the two groups differ in the range of devices they used to attract reader attention. The non-native English writers were reported to be more limited in their ability to orient their readers. He also showed that NESs are more explicit in their expression, while NNESs are more implicit. Connor (1984) researched how students who are speakers of Japanese and Spanish express themselves in their mother tongue as compared to how students whose mother

tongue is English express themselves in writing. She concluded that the latter use an abundance of cohesive devices in their mother tongue, but not as diversely as the cohesive devices by NNESs. Connor also reported that NNES writers use less adequate supporting evidence.

Bickner and Peyasantiwong (1988) compared the problems of Taiwanese and American students in their attitudes toward language use, their concepts of essay structure (focusing on conclusions), and their analytical styles. They stated, "Thai students strive to give a balanced perspective, often offering reasons for the adult behaviours they identify" (173). The conclusions of the Thai student writers frequently offered advice or suggestions for changes in behaviour. The conclusions of 40% of the American student writers, on the other hand, were offered in "speculative counterfactual form," a type of reasoning not found in the Thai essays. The counterfactual form is often called "the subjunctive" or "the past subjunctive" for expressing conditions contrary to fact (e.g. We **would be able** to understand each other better if we **listened** to each other). The researchers found out that 60% of the Thai texts offered solutions for the problem as described in the texts using *should.* In the 1990s, trends changed.

In time, writing instructors started seeing academic writing as a process, paying more attention to developing techniques and strategies for written expression, by giving less priority to grammatical structures. This trend is represented by Homstad and Torson (2000), Matsuda and De Pew (2002), and Reichelt (1999). Matsuda and De Pew mentioned four articles on early L2 writing, inspired by the 2000 SSLW (Symposium of Second Language Writing). The articles include a wide range of student populations, from a 5-year old Chinese boy in Indiana, US, and pre-school children in Casablanca, Morocco, to L1 and L2 middle school students in Houston, Texas, and high school students in California. The authors provided methodological perspectives, including a case study, an introspective re-analysis of ethnographic data, and a linguistic analysis of a learner corpus. Reichelt (1999) provided an overview of 233 written sources about foreign language writing research and pedagogy in the United States. This review of the literature on foreign language writing research and pedagogy was intended to provide information about a type of second-language writing (SLW) neglected in most discussions within the field of SLW, which has focused primarily on writing done in English. She concluded that there were clear differences between ESL and EFL writing especially in the topics addressed in research and in the interests in process approaches to writing instruction.

In the last three decades, when assessing whether a text has been successfully written and is effective, the tendency has been to establish whether the text is logical and convincing enough to achieve its intended purpose. The comparative

analysis of written texts attracts even greater attention from scholars and it receives support by the idea that discourse is structured differently in different languages. When Silva (1993) analyzed 72 reports of empirical research, comparing how they were written in two different languages, he provided an overview of teaching methods and strategies used by researchers and instructors of writing in English as a second language. The findings reported salient differences regarding composing processes and features of written texts such as fluency, accuracy, quality and structure. Generally, adult L2 writing was assumed to be distinct, simpler, less effective and less fluent than L1 writing.

Later on, research was done to analyze specific features of student persuasive essays. Ferris (1994) carried out a detailed analysis of thematic structure and rhetorical elements, showing that the length and number of clauses were considerable factors affecting the success and quality of writing persuasive texts. It was interesting to read that NESs wrote topic sentences containing fewer sub-topics, whereas NNESs devised better developed topic sentences, containing subtopics which were developed later in the text. In his dissertation, Choi (2005) identified and studied the ways in which native speakers of Korean and native speakers of English write argumentative essays in English. He studied the types of mistakes, textual organization and cohesive devices in the essays of both groups. The conclusions illustrated that Korean students had serious problems with articles and that both groups used diverse cohesive devices. In his dissertation, Monassar (2005) analyzed the contrastive linking devices in the essays of students from Oman writing in English and in the essays of American students. The study pointed out the fact that Arab students used linking devices inadequately and used them limitedly compared to American students. Uysal (2008) examined whether writers from shared cultural backgrounds (Turkish) show common writing patterns when writing in their L1 and L2. Interviews were conducted to discover the reasoning behind certain rhetorical patterns and their transfer from L1 to L2 writing. The results show that besides context, topic and audience affected the bidirectional transfer.

All of the above mentioned studies analyzed student essays, but they rarely explored students' personal views and practices in identifying difficulties in composing. The quotes by students used in research so far have emphasized the language difficulties, but no study identified student views on logical organization and content difficulties, which is one of the motivations for this research.

4. Methodology

This section focuses on the following issues: description of the participants, procedures of data collection, instruments used, and methods of analysis.

4.1. Participants

The number of participants in this study was 38. The participants, all undergraduate students, were recruited from Purdue University. Nineteen of them were enrolled in the English 10600 course, and 19 were enrolled in English 10600i, freshman composition course designed for international students. Participation was on voluntary basis and there was no monetary compensation. All participants filled out the questionnaire during the fall semester of 2008. All the participants had a secondary or high school degree and were admitted to Purdue University. The participants were classified as students with intermediate and advanced proficiency of English with the following test score requirements: TOEFL of 550 (PBT)/213 (CBT)/79 (IBT) or higher (General) and score of 570 (PBT)/230 (CBT)/88 (IBT) or higher (Freshman Engineering); SAT score of 480 or higher on the Critical Reading section or ACT score of 19 or higher on the English section.

The participants were asked to provide basic demographic data, such as their major, first language, years of learning English, age and sex. The native languages of the students are as follows: English (for all NES), Korean, Chinese, Spanish, Arabic, and Hindi. Regarding sex, 9 participants were female, 29 male. The range in age of the participants was 18-29 (median=19). The variety of majors was as follows: Actuarial science, Pre-dentistry, Classical studies, Engineering, Computer science, Liberal arts, Management, Political science, Communication, Psychology, Biology, and Interior design. All of NNESs were bi- and multilingual. The range of years of learning English was 3 to 14 years (median=9).

Status[2]	Major	First language	Years of studying English	Age	Sex
1-NES	Undecided	ENGL	14	19	M
1	Management	ENGL	14	19	M
1	Inter design	ENGL	14	19	F
1	ECE	ENGL	NULL	18	M
1	PRE-FARMACY	ENGL	18	18	M

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[2] The category *status* has two values. NESs were marked with 1, NNESs were marked with 2.

1	Actuarial science	ENGL	NULL	19	M
1	Engineering	ENGL	18	18	M
1	Undecided	ENGL	18	18	M
1	comp science	ENGL	18	18	M
1	Biology	ENGL	19	19	F
1	IM	ENGL	20	20	M
1	MET	ENGL	19	19	M
1	Visual communication design	ENGL	8	18	M
1	ECET	ENGL	19	19	M
1	Pre-vet	ENGL	14	18	M
1	Engineering	ENGL	14	18	M
1	Engineering	ENGL	14	18	M
2-NNES	Psychology	Arabic	4	18	M
2	Mechanical Eng	Mandarin-Ch	5	18	M
2	Management	Spanish	7	19	M
2	IM	Korean	3	20	F
2	Accounting	Korean	4	29	M
2	Communication	Korean	8	24	M
2	Management	Chinese	6	21	M
2	Engineering	Korean	12	18	M
2	political science	Korean	9	20	F
2	Management	Korean	14	20	M
2	Agecon	Chinese	12	21	M
2	Chemical Engineering	Malasya-Chinese	13	20	F
2	HTM	Korean	8	19	F
2	Management	Hindi	more than 10	19	M
2	FCP	Chinese	6	18	M
2	Comp science	Korean	less than 1 year	19	M
2	Liberal Art	Korean	6	21	F
2	Electric eng	Chinese	12	20	M
2	Classics-Latin	Chinese	11	18	M
1-NES	Pre-dentistry	ENGL	18	18	F
1-NES	Actuarial science	ENGL	18	18	F

4.2. Procedures of data collection

The methods of data collection applied in this paper are primary and secondary. The primary research consisted of observation, questionnaire distribution and statistical data analysis. During the fall 2008, one section of English 10600and

two sections of English 10600i[3] at Purdue University were chosen, with previous arrangements with the instructors teaching these classes. I observed two of the classes once, earlier in the semester, to become familiar with their structure, activities and students' involvement. It was arranged with three instructors to dismiss their classes earlier on the day when I distributed the questionnaire. After I was certain that students' confidentiality was maintained, since their instructors were not involved in the research and were absent, I introduced the project to the students explaining its purpose and benefits.

The students who decided to participate were given a questionnaire. The NESs were asked to answer some of the questions (1-24), whereas NNES were asked to answer all 29 questions. The survey was anonymous and participation voluntary. Participants were observed as they filled out the questionnaire and clarification was provided where necessary. Nineteen NES and twenty-four NNESs (43 in total) were asked to fill out the questionnaire, but due to some problems that occurred during the data collection, such as incorrectly answered questions (students did not rank the given options correctly), unreturned questionnaires, and wrong demographic data (two NNESs said English is their first language), only 38 questionnaires were analyzed in this study.

4.3. Instruments used

The questionnaire was designed and distributed for the purposes of this study. It consisted of 29 statements/questions (see Appendix A). Questions 1-24 were intended for all students, while questions 25-29 were intended for NNES only, since the questions referred to the different writing practices and conventions in students' first languages. Five-point Likert scale was used for the possible answer choices (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree). Questions 15-20 required students to rank the answers from *least to most important*, while questions from 21-24 required students to rank the choices from *least to most problematic*. The time participants needed to complete the questionnaire ranged from 10-15 minutes.

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[3] English 10600i is a freshman composition course designed for international students.

4.4. Methods of data analysis

For the purposes of this study, descriptive statistics-frequencies using SPSS were run.

All data from the questionnaires were first coded in an Excel chart. Comparisons were drawn both between the answers of L1 and L2 writers and between the answers within the L2 group. The results were then compared and presented in graphs. Other variables that might have affected the findings include the major, years of studying English, age, and sex of the participants, may be examined in a future study. As mentioned earlier, understanding the similarities and differences in problems in composing between L1s and L2s will help teachers re-examine the strategies for teaching writing.

5. Results

This section elaborates on the specific answers given by L1s (NESs) and L2s (NNESs) regarding the writing process and on what is important in college writing for these students.

5.1. Similarities

In this section, I will present the similar difficulties facing students, by comparing the answers between the two groups and within the L2 group. Regarding universal problems in composing, both, L1s and L2s reported that the following issues are difficult when writing in English: *writing a good thesis statement, keeping clarity by using appropriate sentence structures, and convincing the readers that the solution will work*. Both groups also stated that having a specific audience in mind (e.g. a person, an organization, editorial board, or newspaper readers) helps them produce a better paper.

For statement 1, "Writing a good thesis statement is difficult," 42.1% of NNESs disagreed they had problems with the thesis statement, and 36.8% of NESs agreed and strongly agreed they had problems with writing good thesis statement. From the NNESs, 36.8% agreed and 42.1% were neutral regarding problems with the thesis statement. The results are shown in Graph 1 below.
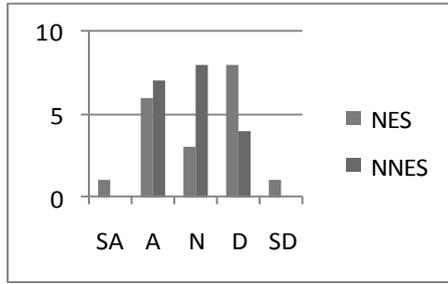
Graph 1. Q1. Writing a good thesis statement is difficult

For statement 4, "Keeping clarity by using appropriate sentence structures is difficult," 36.8% of NESs and 42.1% of NNESs agreed, and 5.3% of NES and 10.5% of NNESs *strongly* agreed they had difficulties with clarity using appropriate sentence structures (see Graph 2). Students were given further explanation on this issue of keeping clarity by avoiding fragments, combining sentences with appropriate linking words and using more relative clauses.
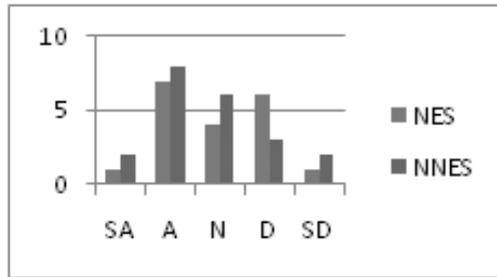
Graph 2. Q4. Keeping clarity by using appropriate sentence structures is difficult

Statement 13 asked if having a specific audience in mind really helps students to produce better papers. Both groups, NES (78.9%) and NNES (63.2%) agreed that having a specific audience in mind, such as an exact person or organization to address, instead of just writing to an abstract audience, really helps them compose better.
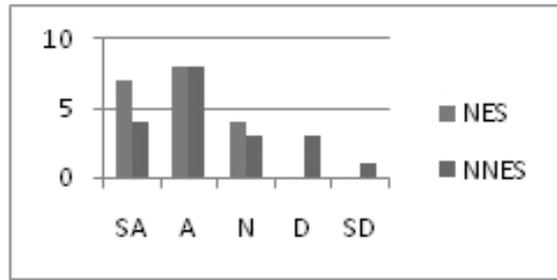
Graph 3. Q13. Having a specific audience in mind (a person, organization, newspaper readers, editorial board etc.) when you write, helps you produce a better paper.

As we can see, similarly to previous research findings by many scholars, this research shows that students (both L1 and L2 writers) self-reported that *writing a good thesis statement* and *using appropriate syntactic structures* are difficult for them. It was interesting to see that students are aware of how much *having specific audience in mind* helps them with the writing process.

Apart from the "universal" problems writing instructors and scholars see, this research shows that instructors' views and students' views differ in regard to the issues of *expanding topic sentences and providing good support.* Students' responses to statements 2 and 3 were surprising since they were opposite from what studies in second language writing and writing instructors claim. Statement 2 inquired whether it was difficult for students to expand a topic sentence into a logical paragraph. The majority of students, NESs (42.1%) and NNESs (47.4%), disagreed that expanding a topic sentence into a paragraph was difficult for them. Furthermore, NESs (73.7%) and NNESs (63.1%) do not find it difficult to support their thesis with examples. Studies by Silva (1993), Leki (1992) and Connor (1996), indicated that L2 writers were less persuasive and used less effective language to prove their point. As I understand it, "using effective language" and "being persuasive" involve not only using proper vocabulary, but also providing good support for the thesis and developing topic sentences into logical paragraphs. If this is the case, then students' and scholars' views on effective texts differ.

Graphs 4 and 5 show students' answers to statements 2 and 3 in the questionnaire.
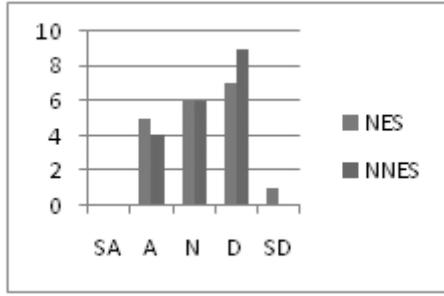
Graph 4. Q2. Expanding a topic sentence into a paragraph is difficult
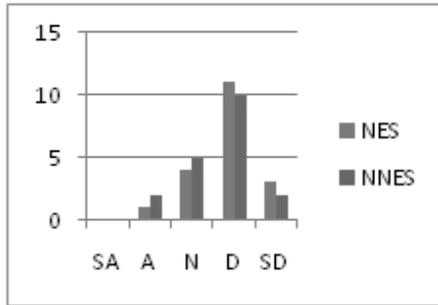
Graph 5. Q3. Providing examples to support your thesis is difficult

Another similarity worth mentioning in answers between L1 and L2 writers, regards the most difficult part of a proposal paper. Both NESs (57.9%) and NNESs (42.1%) reported, in questions 21-24 from the questionnaire, that *convincing the reader that the solution will* work is more difficult compared to *defining the problem, explaining the causes of the problem and explaining the solution* (see Graph 6).
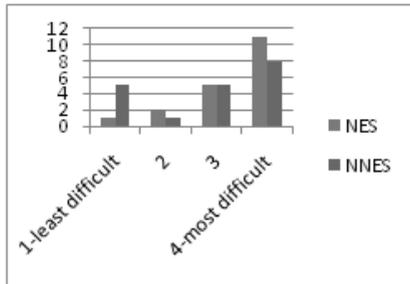

**Graph 6.** Q24. Convincing the readers that your solution will work

5.2. Differences

This section presents the differences in answers of the NESs and NNEs who participated in this research. Regarding whether they receive comments from their teachers to add transition words, 52.6% of NESs disagreed that they received comments about lack of transition words, whereas 36.8% of NNESs agreed they received comments on transition signals. After discussing this issue with some of my colleagues, who are writing instructors, we saw two possible explanations for this. The first one being, NESs do not want to admit that their texts lack transition signals, and do not see the importance of transition signals, and the second reason may be that their instructor does not comment on transition signals, but puts more emphasis on other elements of writing.

The other difference in answers between NESs and NNESs refers to what students think affects the message of an argumentative text most. Students were asked to rank the possible options given (see Appendix A, questions 15-20) from least to the most important. Results show that for NESs (78.9%) visuals used are *least* important for conveying the message of an argumentative text, while the *most* important is the strength of the arguments used (63.2%). NNESs (63%) reported visuals to be an important element and 37% to be the least important element which affects the message of an argumentative text. Similarly to NESs, NNESs (31.6%) reported that strength of the arguments is most important in an argumentative text. The results are shown in Graphs 7 and 8.
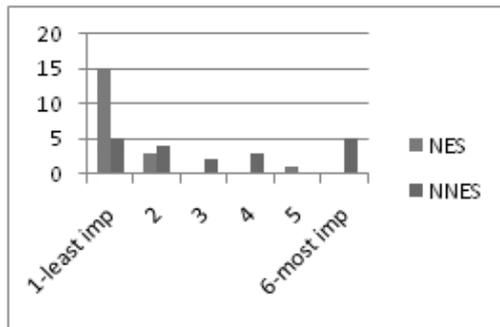

Graph 7. Q16. Visuals used
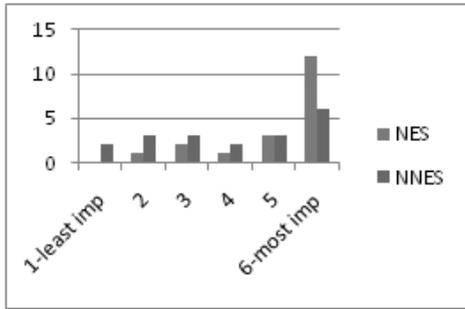
Graph 8. Q19. The strength of the arguments used

The second research question in this study asked if there are differences in the answers within the L2 group. The L2 group included nine Korean and seven Chinese students. They all gave neutral responses to statements 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12. Statements 8 and 9 referred to *problems with introductions and conclusions*. Previous studies in L2 writing showed that L2 students had problems with conclusions because, instead of summarizing, they presented new ideas or gave recommendation in the conclusion. However, in this research students *did* report having problems with conclusions.

Statements 10, 11 and 12 referred to *difficulties in describing the context of an argumentative text, presenting logical sequence in an argumentative essay and deciding on the audience*, respectively. Explanation for the occurrence of neutral answers will be presented in the discussion section. To sum up, within the L2 group, Korean and Chinese students responded very similarly; however, Korean students gave unanimous answers regarding clarity and logical organization of argumentative essays.

There were surprising responses to four statements of the questionnaire. The reactions of both L1 and L2 writers to statement 14, "Writing a research paper at my age is difficult," will be discussed first. I agree with some of my Purdue colleagues that writing a good research paper in the first year of college is very difficult for the students due to the complexity of this genre. However, students have disagreed with this. Among the L1s, 42.1% disagreed and 36.8% strongly disagreed that writing a research paper at their age is difficult. Among L2s, 31.6% disagreed and 10.5% *strongly* disagreed with the same statement. Other surprising responses were to statements 25, 27 and 28, which were designed only for the L2s. One-third, 31.6% disagreed, and the same number *strongly* disagreed that they first plan their essays in their native language, and then translate them into English. Explanation for this will be presented in the discussion section.

Statements 27 and 28 looked into the reasons why writing in English is difficult for students. For statement 27, L2s (47.4%) disagreed and *strongly* disagreed that it is difficult for them to formulate their ideas in English. Finally, for statement 28, the majority (73.7%) either disagreed or *strongly* disagreed that they didn't understand what the requirements of the teacher were, due to the language-related problems. Graphs 9, 10 and 11 present the discussed results.
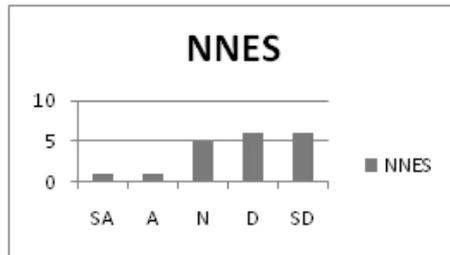
Graph 9. Q 25. I plan the essays in my native language first and then translate them into English
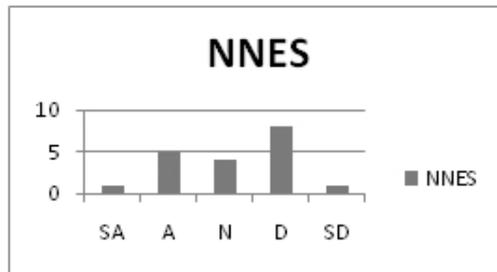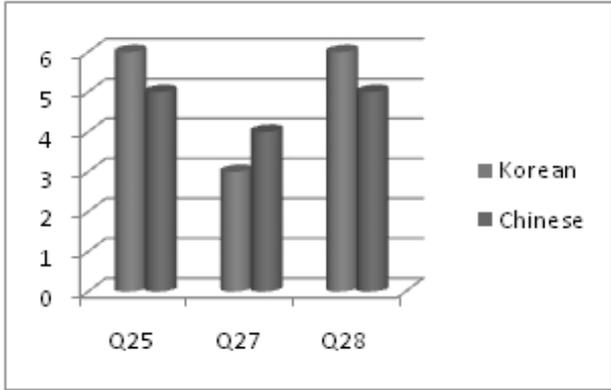

Graph 10. Q 27. I find writing papers in English difficult because **I can't formulate my ideas in English**
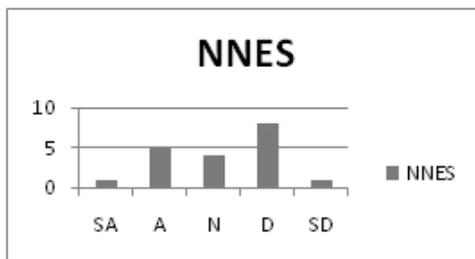
Graph 11. Q28. I find writing papers in English difficult because **I don't understand what my teacher wants me to do (language-related problems)**

The graph below (Graph 12) shows how similarly Korean and Chinese students answered questions 25, 27 and 28.

Graph 12. Korean vs. Chinese students' answers

Finally, the third research question asked whether students are able, by themselves, to identify the problems they are experiencing in writing. I would like to point out here that L1 writers were more confident with self-reporting, whereas I have doubts about L2 writers' confidence in responding to questionnaires. After discussing this issue with some colleagues, who are also international students, and on the basis of their educational backgrounds, we have agreed that we have not been trained to express openly our views on writing. The reason for this lies in the fact that writing curricula are still in the developing stage, and there has not been a long tradition of teaching or self-assessing writing in English in our countries (South Korea, Spain, Columbia, and Macedonia).

6. Discussion

This section summarizes the findings, offers some possible explanations for them, and discusses pedagogical implications regarding writing instruction.

Both L1 and L2 writers in this study reported having problems with maintaining clarity by using appropriate sentence structures, as well as with convincing the readers that a solution they propose to a problem will work. Writing a good thesis statement is more difficult for L2s than for L1s. Both groups stated that having a specific audience in mind rather than an abstract one is very helpful for producing a better text. They also reported that strength of arguments is most important for conveying the message of an argumentative

text. There were differences in answers between the groups regarding transition words (L2s received comments from teachers on adding them, L1s did not), and regarding the importance of visuals for conveying the message of an argumentative text (for L1s visuals are least important, for L2s visuals are important). Generally, Korean and Chinese students gave very similar answers and reported to be neutral for statements 6, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 26. Both groups stated that convincing the reader that a solution to a problem will work is very difficult. The second similarity, which was surprising to my colleagues and me, is that students disagreed that they use their native language when planning essays. We language instructors think it is the opposite, because we see sentence structures or organizational patterns in student essays which are not typical of the English language. Those "improper" structures usually affect the effectiveness of the text and readers' comprehension. Both groups did not report any problems with writing good introductions and conclusions.

The findings are similar to some extent to the studies mentioned in the literature review. For example, this study adds to the conclusions of earlier studies that L1 writing strategies may *not* be transferred to L2 contexts and that general composing process patterns seem largely similar in L1 and L2. Furthermore, as Monassar (2005) pointed out about Arab students using linking devices inadequately and using them limitedly compared to American students, L2s in my study said their texts lacked transition signals. However, there are some differences in the findings of the studies. Although Connor (1996) presented that L2s used less adequate supporting evidence, L2s in my study disagreed that it was difficult for them to provide examples to support their claims. Furthermore, L2 students have always been reported to produce less effective texts, but in this study it is the L1 students who said it was difficult for them to maintain clarity, which leads to less effective texts.

Some possible explanations for the outcomes of this study are offered here. The first issue to be pointed out, and which may be one of the confounds, is the different nature of student assignments. L1s who participated in this study produced a writer's autobiography, personal essay, literature review, an interview report, and a persuasive essay, whereas L2s wrote a definition argument, an evaluation argument, proposal, letter to the editor, causal argument and research paper. The fact that L1s wrote argumentative essays throughout the semester certainly helped them improve their critical thinking skills, which was reflected in their clear answers in the questionnaire; they rarely had a neutral attitude towards a statement in the questionnaire. The next issue worth mentioning is the fact that L1s' responses were based on their ENGL 106 (freshman composition at Purdue) course experience, while the answers of the L2s to the questions about argumentative and proposal essays were based on

their previous experience with writing, which for most of them was obtained in their home countries. The fact that L2s had not worked on an argumentative essay when the questionnaire was distributed may have affected the results.

As for important pedagogical implications, I would suggest that the questionnaire should be translated into native languages of the participants. By doing so, researchers will insure that all the questions are understood fully. Performing interviews after the questionnaire answers are analyzed would be useful for clarifying the reasons for students' answers. For example, researchers and writing instructors could better understand why so many of the students gave neutral answers. They may be able to trace the reasons into student educational background or realize that students were afraid of teachers' reactions to their answers (although their teachers were not included in the project). Another possible explanation is the different understanding of the word "neutral." In my understanding, it means neither agree nor disagree, but there is always a possibility that students have not understood some of the questions in the same way I understand them. Therefore, I believe that apart from the four-point Likert scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree), we should break up the word *neutral* and add the following options: *I don't know*, *I don't understand the question*, and *N/A*.

Student self-reported problems indicate that instructors should pay more attention to teaching strategies for better sentence structures. Students are aware they have problems with sentence fragments and run-ons, and they do self-report that they need more help with them. Because of being afraid of making mistakes with constructing complex sentences, they overuse simple sentences. One possible exercise, which may help both L1 and L2 writers, is to practice joining simple sentences with relative pronouns. Asking students then to replace full relative clauses with reduced relative clauses could provide them with skills to avoid sentence fragments. We as writing instructors should make sure to always provide a specific audience for our students, such as an exact person, an organization, exact newspaper readers, a specific editorial board etc., and provide examples of texts which meet the expectations of those audiences.

Since our students struggle with the strength of their arguments, we should work on developing their persuasive style. One possible way to empower students to write better persuasive essays is to teach them how to *not* take too long to state their position relative to the ideas they have quoted and summarized. Students need more practice with the forms used for agreeing and disagreeing. With L2s, more work should be done in developing their self-reporting skills, which implies encouraging their ability to think critically about their own writing and helping them build more self-confidence as writers. This can be achieved if we do not assign topics for our students, but let them choose

and work on topics they have expertise in. Also, helping L2s realize that the longer it takes them to state their position in an essay, the more frustrated their readers can get. Writing instructors should pay more attention to allowing their students to use more visual rhetoric, since half of the students said this was somehow important. Isn't it true that processes may be easier to comprehend if they are broken down and displayed visually? Moreover, complicated cause-and-effect relationships can be presented as images, which will help readers know where to start, what to do, and how to reach a conclusion.

The final implication in this paper is that doing a correlation analysis to examine the relations between student majors and their answers may reveal that individual writing process is not only the result of various educational backgrounds, but also of students' professional interests. It will be valuable to explore what is difficult and most important in writing for science majors as opposed to non-science majors. I believe my ongoing search to understand self-reported problems of my students will lead writing instructors to explore ways to better address their students' specific writing needs.

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Appendix A

Major: _____
First language: _____
Years of learning English: ____
Age: _____
Sex: M/F

QUESTIONNAIRE
Writing processes-Similarities and Differences between NS and NNS
Dr. April Ginther, Principal Investigator
Mira Bekar, PhD student, Co-investigator
Purdue University-Department of English

Dear participants, your answers and comments in this questionnaire will be very useful for my research. Please ask for the researcher's help if any of the questions are unclear to you. If you are a native speaker of English please answer the questions 1 – 24 only. If you are a non-native speaker please answer all the questions. If any of the questions does not apply to you, please put N/A next to it.

Which of the areas listed below do you find difficult when writing a paper?
Please put a check in the box which best describes your views about the problem.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1.Writing a good thesis statement is difficult					
2. Expanding a topic sentence into a paragraph is difficult					
3. Providing examples to support your thesis is difficult					

4. Keeping clarity by using appropriate sentence structures is difficult				
5. Distinguishing between relevant and irrelevant information is difficult				
6. I often receive comments from my teacher to add linking / transition words (however, on balance)				
7. I cannot always keep the focus on the subject I am writing about				
8. I have problems writing good introductions				
9. I have problems writing appropriate conclusions				
10. When writing an argumentative essay **it is difficult to describe the context**				
11. When writing an argumentative essay **it is difficult to organize it into a**				

logical sequence					
12. When writing an argumentative essay **it is difficult to decide on the audience**					
13. Having a specific audience in mind (a person, organization, newspaper readers, editorial board etc.) when you write, helps you produce a better paper					
14. Writing a research paper at my age is too difficult					

What do you think affects the message of an argumentative text?
(rank the options with 1 to 6, where **1 is least important** and **6 is most important**)
Put one number from 1 to 6 next to the question.

What do you think affects the message of an argumentative text?	rank
15. The language used	
16. The visuals used	
17. The clear structure	
18. How well you explain your position	
19. The strength of the arguments you use	
20. The fact that you considered your opponents' views	

What are the most problematic parts of a proposal (problem/solution) paper?
(rank the problematic areas with 1 to 4, where **1 is least problematic** and **4 is most problematic**)

Put one number from 1 to 4 next to the question.

What are the most problematic parts of a proposal (problem/solution) paper?	rank
21. Defining the problem in details	
22. Explaining the causes of the problem	
23. Explaining the solution step-by-step	
24. Convincing the readers that your solution will work	

The questions below refer only to participants whose native language is not English.

Statement	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
25. I plan the essays in my native language first and then translate them into English					
26. I find writing papers in English difficult because **the writing conventions/rules are different from my native language**					
27. I find writing papers in English difficult because **I can't formulate my ideas in English**					
28. I find writing papers in English difficult because **I don't understand**					

what my teacher wants me to do (language-related problems)				
29. Writing **formal** email messages in English is as difficult as writing papers (argumentative, proposal, research) in English				