ABSTRACT

THE PRACTICE OF REVISION: ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

By

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Through the lens of a monolingual Native English Speaker (NES) with bilingual parents, this thesis examines how the epistemological beliefs and practices of English composition teachers affect the revising behaviors and attitudes of English Language Learners (ELLs). This thesis also examines the revision process, first, through skilled ELLs, and second, through two struggling ELLs, all subjects in Vivian Zamel’s, Sondra Perl’s and Ann Raimes’s process studies. As these researchers point out, the unskilled ELLs produced poorly written texts riddled with grammar and spelling errors, the result of premature and excessive attention to grammar and usage, apparently a consequence of immoderate concern for local textual features by composition teachers, conveyed through erroneous comments, written and spoken. This thesis also attempts to show that the lower quality texts are the result of writers’ poor attitudes, typical of Haswell’s noncompetitive bottom writers. By contrast, the skilled ELL subjects revised similarly to skilled native writers, demonstrating strategies that might help unskilled writers wishing to disentangle themselves from poor revising practices. This thesis emphasizes these
strategies and adds suggestions for composition teachers to help prevent a premature and excessive focus on grammar and usage among ELLs by encouraging teachers to contextualize feedback and stimulate students to self-correct.
THE PRACTICE OF REVISION: ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS

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CHAPTER 1
COMPLEXITIES OF REVISION

The intention of this paper is to show how English Language Learners (ELLs) get tripped up during the process of revision, in part because of native language (L1) and second language (L2) interactions and influences, and also because teachers, in response to frequent surface errors, over emphasize grammar and usage, resulting in a tendency of ELLs to migrate towards local textual features more than global features. Also, this paper will point out significant differences in determination among ELLs because of psycho-social factors related to attitudes towards one’s native language; a dearth of determination tends to result in early surrender and eventual detachment from the revising process.

Researchers have parsed ELLs into many subsets based upon factors relating to L2 acquisition. While these subsets are not the subject of this thesis, a brief introduction may be helpful to explain some of the behaviors this thesis highlights and to support the observations and conclusions offered. To begin with, many ELLs are bilingual even though they are "learning" an L2; however, they acquire their L2 in different ways. Some ELLs experience exposure to an L2 at a very early age because they are born into an immigrant family—simultaneous bilingualism—or they emigrate with their family from their native country at a very early age—sequential bilingualism (Montrul 2).

These distinctions form the basis of additional subsets of ELLs. First, as Kietlinska points out, there are international ELLs and immigrant ELLs (66).
International ELLs are typically monolingual when compared to simultaneous and sequential bilinguals. Therefore, not surprisingly, bilingual ELLs are generally immigrant ELLs. The immigrant group can be further divided into two groups: generation 1.5 students and heritage speakers. Although these two groups are very similar, there is one important distinction. Generation 1.5 students are born abroad (like sequential bilinguals), so at least part of their education occurs in their native country (Suarez 36). Heritage speakers, on the other hand, are born in the United States and educated entirely in the United States; thus, they experience two languages and two cultures from the start. A heritage speaker “speaks or at least understands the language, … is to some degree bilingual in that language and in English” (Suarez 29).

Some researchers disagree with the term heritage speaker because it does not acknowledge the bilingual status of the individual; rather, it suggests that the native language spoken is inferior, in need of repair. Instead, these researchers recommend considering the term L2 user, or L1/L2 user (Valdés 413). In this way, the native language of the individual—as he or she speaks it—is represented as being of value, not part of a problem. As mentioned, these subsets are not the focus of this thesis; therefore, I will typically use the term ELL, even when referring to subjects in Perl's study concerning basic writers because basic writers are frequently misclassified as native speakers (Matsuda 648).

These categories of ELLs apparently help ELL educators provide more effective teaching programs, as each category reflects—or attempts to reflect—a set of unique needs. For instance, international ELLs are generally thought to be more academically proficient than immigrant ELLs because of developed L1 literacy skills, typically
acquired in their native country. Case and Taylor report how L1 literacy skills give an international ELL an advantage over an immigrant learner without L1 literacy skills:

Students who have developed first-language literacy skills begin with a number of advantages. For example, they bring with them the knowledge that print carries meaning. If their native language is alphabetic, they have a notion of graphemes and how they can be combined to make words. Even students who speak languages that are not based on an alphabet, Chinese students, for example, bring with them the skills and knowledge of having already learned to read. (130)

By contrast, many heritage speakers have problems with literacy skills in both their native language and in English (Kietlinska 66). In addition and possibly more influential, some heritage speakers lack a positive relationship between their native culture and their self-identity. For instance, as Dolores Duran-Cerda contends, Spanish heritage speakers “feel ashamed that they are of Hispanic/Latino descent” (43). ELL programs designed for heritage speakers try to address these disadvantages with the hope of making heritage speakers feel better about their heritage, so that they might tackle the challenges of learning L1 and L2 literacy with a greater sense of identity and purpose.

In addition to lacking L1 literacy skills and confidence in their L1 culture and language, many ELLs fall prey to the negative effects of simultaneous or sequential bilingualism. For instance, Valdés maintains that the bilingual’s use of language is not symmetrical because bilinguals “manifest very different strengths in their two languages” (414). Also, according to Valdés, in cases where a dominant language has been imposed, many bilinguals develop a unique way of speaking with other bilinguals that does not
necessarily conform to the standard forms of either language. These tailored languages are called “contact varieties of language” (414). A contact variety involves “widespread borrowing of lexical items as well as code-switching, the alternating use of two languages at word, phrase, or clause levels” (415). Ultimately, a contact variety of language alters both languages. Thus, many bilinguals are in a state of flux as far as language is concerned and, as a result, lack the linguistic stability monolingual speakers take for granted (Valdés 415).

Additional negative effects of bilingualism relate more directly to the composing process. For example, bilinguals typically have smaller vocabularies compared to monolinguals, and, as a result, may struggle finding the right words and phrases while composing (Allman 1). Second, depending upon the perception of one’s native language, some ELLs show less determination than other ELLs during the composing process (Weaver 262). A lack of determination, however, may not be directly related to bilingualism, but, rather, to the writer’s poor self-image shaped by the host country’s negative attitudes toward the writer’s L1, and also from the low expectations of teachers (Weaver 262). Someone with a negative self-image may demonstrate less effort when faced with challenging and complex operations, such as revising. In sum, L2 acquisition, L1 literacy exposure, attitudes towards one's L1 culture and language, and level of determination are all reflected in the various subsets of ELLs. These factors influence how ELLs revise, as this thesis will show.

Frequently, however, these factors are not taken into consideration in both mainstream and ELL composition classes because many think of composing and revising as a simple and straightforward task, one everyone should be proficient at with basic
instruction and practice, regardless of one’s linguistic background, regardless of the challenges discussed above. Bushman and Ervin write that some believe “writing is a uniform thing, uncomplicated by such factors as race, social class, and disciplinary conventions” (138). A contemporary textbook for fifth-graders states, “Now that you have polished the content, organization, and style of your essay, proofread it to be sure that it is free of grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors” (Marshall et al 323). Antonia Chandrasegaran apparently holds a similar view of revision:

> Generally, the correction of such errors [local errors] is a matter of canceling and/or inserting words or letters. The focus of attention need extend no further than the level of the erroneous word or sentence. Higher level consideration of purpose, tone and audience are usually not involved. (26)

All three of these instances portray revision as a simple process, just a matter of polishing up one’s thoughts or canceling words and letters. But this view of revision ignores the fact that many struggle with the composing process, particularly many ELLs. Let us look at how such a simple view of revision does not necessarily reflect the process of revision.

Simplicity in revision results from a simplistic view about learning: everyone can learn in a similar manner, as long as they work hard and remain disciplined. Accordingly, instructions to learners are not individualized, nor are they necessarily complex; the tone is typically straightforward, harsh, and unadorned. After all, the instructions are presented as the “secret to all writing,” and, therefore, formatted to look as important as a hallowed religious document and emphasized similarly, as a grammar and composition text from the 1970s asserts: “With repeated use, the list will become so
clearly fixed in your mind that you will follow it automatically” (Warriner et al 631).

Through this perspective, writing instruction parallels instructions for cooking, making beds or cleaning rifles—essential activities that under certain circumstances the majority is expected to master without question. Catherine Haar calls this conception of writing a “stage model of composing,” in which writing happens in clear stages, simply and conveniently (18).

In addition, the idea that writing is simple stems from a product-oriented approach to composition studies: “Since only the finished product counted under the traditional model, students were trained to put pen to paper and within a relatively short period of time, one class period, for example, produce a finished piece of writing” (Scordaras 11). Through such a perspective, the process of composition is a simple matter of jotting down what is in the mind of the writer; the writing process is reduced to a simple operation, that of a copyist. A popular writing guide states, “The mind travels faster than the pen,” subtly suggesting that content is readily available to writers as ripe fruit hanging from a vine is available to hungry travelers; one only needs to write faster, a task accomplished through practice (Strunk and White 69). It is no wonder, then, that composition instructors expect most students to write well and turn in neat final drafts. Writing, after all, is simply a matter of following the rules and instructions, learning to be disciplined and practicing every day.

Today, in spite of a push for the return of a “focus on form,” as Scordaras points out (9), composition instruction, as a result of process-centered research, has moved away from a product-oriented approach to a process-oriented one, where writing is viewed not
only as the transcription of thoughts, but also as an activity that generates ideas (Perl, “Composing” 334). Catherine Haar writes:

Process theorists shifted from a stage model of composing . . . to a recursion model. . . . This recursion model brings in cognitive psychology. Investigating how thoughts and words team up leads to thinking about revision as not just happening to a page of text but something happening within the cognitive apparatus of the writer. (18)

Since composing is located in the mind of the writer, as opposed to the paper it is written on, the epistemological focus shifts from written instructions and formulas to the writer’s mind. As a result, writers are not thought of simply or generically, or nebulously, as the objects in a painting by Claude Monet tend to be perceived, or as a crowd at a concert, but, rather, as individuals with diverse backgrounds, and linguistic richness, all of which must be taken into consideration during the composing process. Accordingly, writing difficulties are no longer unforeseen or deemed the result of not trying hard enough, and ELLs’ missteps can be better anticipated and addressed, particularly compared with the stage model of composing.

Through this perspective, writing well is more than following a proscribed set of rules or patterns; on the contrary, one must negotiate with a dynamic process just as kayakers negotiate rapids—for revising is a very active process, similar to a person playing tennis alone, hitting the ball from one side of the court to the other side, running in the meantime to catch up to the ball. Most researchers call this aspect of revising a recursive process: Writers “[shuttle] back-and-forth” between something in the mind and something outside of the mind, “continually composing and recomposing [one’s]
meanings and [one’s intentions]” (Perl, “Understanding” 369). Perl acknowledges such a process while observing five unskilled junior college basic writers during five 90-minute writing sessions:

Composing does not occur in a straightforward, linear fashion. The process is one of accumulating discrete bits down on the paper and then working from those bits to reflect upon, structure, and then further develop what one means to say. . . . Both aspects . . . have a clarifying effect.

(“Composing” 331)

Ellen Lavelle and Nancy Zuercher, examining the perspectives of both native English speakers and ELLs, believe that revising consists of “alternating levels of focus” between “macro” and “micro” concerns (378). They add that “writing and revision are intertwined in a dynamic process geared toward making meaning,” which strikes me as being similar to the way a sculptor eventually arrives at his or her final image: writers eventually “[find] the shape” (377). Similarly, Donald Murray thinks that good writing evolves “through a process of exploration and discovery” (2). Lastly, Haar writes, “The process movement led to defining revision not just as changes to a text but to events related to work habits and actions and mental events” (18). Through this perspective, let us look more closely at how writers navigate these aspects of composing, and then look at how ELLs struggle through the revising process; while success is hoped for, difficulties are expected because composing is not simple, nor is there a universal recipe to master it.

What seems to determine success among ELLs is their ability to mimic the back and forth nature of revision while writing—that is, they keep up with the action. Zamel’s most successful writers moved back and forth between meaning and form so quickly that
she characterized their movements as happening at the same time: Revisions “took place almost simultaneously with the rereading and . . . were recorded with such a sense of urgency that the first version was not crossed out until a later rereading” (174). Zamel is not the only researcher to look at revising in this way. Faigley and Witte contend that “expert writers frequently review what they have written and make changes while in the midst of generating a text” (400); in fact, “many activities in writing occur simultaneously—from unconscious processes such as ordering the words in a noun phrase to conscious processes ranging from spelling to planning and monitoring” (412). In this sense, good writing is like a painter with a sprayer quickly moving the nozzle back and forth until the surface is covered.

On the other hand, Zamel’s skilled writers also knew how to maintain a focus when necessary. Zamel observes they “devised strategies that allowed them to pursue the development of their ideas without being sidetracked by lexical and syntactic difficulties” (175). They focused on global processes (ideas), not local processes (lexicon), addressing local features without as much concern as the less skilled writers, and expanding their scope to include entire paragraphs as they revised. Yet they were also flexible; when after focusing on global features for some time, they consciously shifted gears: “Once the ideas were in place, the [skilled] students began to focus on the grammar, adding missing inflections and correcting erroneous forms” (175).

Revising for these writers was not necessarily easy, however. Composing in an L2 is inherently treacherous, requiring the development and use of many strategies to cope with a continuum of unfamiliarity. Among Zamel’s skilled writers, one strategy included making broad and deep content revisions, particularly during the first draft.
They produced multiple subsequent drafts as well, and each draft “generally meant composing anew” with “substantial content changes in vocabulary, syntax, and spelling” (Zamel 173). Such extensive rewriting resulted from a sense that some sort of mismatch between what they intended to say and what they actually said occurred: “Sentences were rewritten until they expressed the writer’s intention more accurately” (Zamel 173). As a result, total composing time ranged from fourteen to eighteen hours.

As expected, they wrestled with the meaning of many complex English words, prompting some to look up words in their native language dictionaries. Zamel notes that this was not easy either, as only two students used the dictionaries effectively:

Others who did not realize that locating the correct spelling of a word often requires trial and error and guesswork opted instead to use a word that they could spell. And yet others repeatedly looked up words in their native language dictionaries to confirm whether they had used the correct English equivalents but, having found these words, did nothing to change the way they had misspelled them. (176)

Zamel later concludes that some students had trouble with the dictionary because they could not “see” the words even after having looked them up (183). Indeed, revising in an L2 is doubly complicated, thus, nothing should be taken for granted, even the act of looking up words in a dictionary.

Other strategies Zamel observed involved rereading. The deep revisions mentioned “often took place during writing sessions that inevitably began with rereading what had been written during a previous session” (174). By rereading aloud, Zamel’s skilled writers developed new perspectives (174). Another strategy observed was
repetition, which was pointed out by both Zamel and Raimes. Zamel notes that her students reread repeatedly (173). In a more vivid and stark example, Raimes observed Yin Ping spend 17.5 minutes rereading the topic question eleven times because “she did not understand the meaning of the word ‘expected’” (241). Likewise, Chih-Hwa’s transcription of her think-aloud composing tape reveals that after she put a small phrase or clause down on paper, she would repeat it a number of times before moving on to complete the thought, as though writing something new depended on what she had just written. Raimes characterizes this as “getting a running start” (247). It seemed that hearing her written words out loud helped Chih-Hwa correct surface level errors. For instance, after saying, “The most remarkable thing was happened,” she says, “Cross out the was” (257). Listening to the pronunciation of the tense revealed it was wrong, something reading or writing alone did not do.

Hearing words out loud, repeating them over and over while trying to make sense of them serves a valuable purpose, and, surprisingly, is not unique to ELLs. Zamel points out that Murray identified such activities among professional native writers and likened such speaking to “conversation between two workmen muttering to each other” (173). Denise Levertov writes concerning professional writers:

One has to have a good ear, but you also have to read what you’re working on aloud. Even if you have a good inner ear there are certain awkwardnesses that only become apparent when you speak out loud. At some stage, you have to at least mutter to yourself. When I’m writing it out, I do a lot of muttering. (qtd. in Murray 32)
If professional native writers concern themselves with how words sound out loud to determine whether the words are awkward or not, writing must be a tricky business. It is doubtful, however, that native writers repeat themselves as much as ELLs, and that it is as essential a practice as it is for ELLs; for such mutterings enabled the ELLs “to move on,” Zamel observes (173). This was the case for Raimes’s Chih-Hwa too, who frequently repeated parts of a written sentence to be able to finish writing the rest of it. In sum, these ELLs showed both flexibility and focus during the process of revision, while frequently and intensely repeating and sounding out words and phrases to ensure correctness and meaning.

By contrast, some ELLs were not as flexible or resourceful. For instance, Zamel’s least skilled writers could not manage revising much more than “short chunks of discourse” (173). In addition, most of their changes showed no concern for the discursive nature of writing, nor did they reflect anything but minor, meaningless changes. Their average total composing times contrasted starkly with the more skilled writers’ composing times: four hours. They expressed a reluctance towards breaking up their texts, and, finally, they apparently did not seek meaning or accuracy through repetition or through the sounding out of words and phrases, a strategy often employed by skilled writers as mentioned above.

Perl’s Tony, who represented most of the writers in Perl’s study, also concentrated on local revisions during the early stages of revising as opposed to more global revisions. Tony made a total of 234 changes, but only twenty-four were global, relating to content: Tony’s revising time “was spent proofreading rather than changing, rephrasing, adding, or evaluating the substantive parts of the discourse” (Perl,
“Composing” 324). In addition, Raimes’s unskilled ELLs took a similar approach to revising. The majority of the revisions made to the eight essays—fifty-eight percent—"concentrated on surface form" (Raimes 246). While this is significantly lower than the local revisions made by Perl’s writers, as Raimes points out, it is still more than half of all the revisions.

An extreme tendency to focus on local features obviously hinders the writer’s ability to address other important aspects of the text. ELLs may not cover all of the bases of local and global revising because they are “overly and prematurely concerned with accuracy” (Raimes 230); in other words, they get stuck “correcting surface-level errors [more] than . . . assessing the fit between their plans and the product (Raimes 230). They “juggle the constraints of writing [and focus] on the presence of error in the text” (Fairbanks 77). The skilled writers, on the other hand, developed strategies to negotiate revision, the way one negotiates the tackling of an oncoming football player—the player, like the process of revision, is dynamic. To make the tackle, the tackler negotiates the movements of the player running with the ball and adjusts accordingly. The unskilled writers, by contrast, were not able to respond to the inherent motion of revision.

In part, ELLs concentrate on local features in response to composition instruction, according to Connie Weaver (19). Before the process era, students were not allowed to write unless they mastered grammar, “as if form preceded content” (Zamel 167). Such a grammar focus often results in grammar worksheet and grammar rule competence, but not in proficient writers, as many ELLs demonstrate. Part of the problem may be that grammar instruction occurs too frequently, mostly in response to student errors. As writers get stuck on local features, it is natural and sensible for teachers to respond with
more grammar instruction. If someone misspells a word or pronounces something incorrectly, why not correct the mistake and teach the solution? But such an efficient way of looking at errors may not be helpful.

Perl insists that many teachers wrongly think that if only Tony knew the rules better, his problems would be solved: “Since the written products of [ELLs] like Tony often look arbitrary, observers commonly assume that the students’ approach is also arbitrary” (“Composing” 328). But Shaughnessy “demonstrated that even the most apparently incoherent writing . . . is evidence of systematic, coherent, rule-governed behavior” (qtd. in Bartholomae 256). Echoing Shaughnessy’s observation, Perl found that her subjects followed a recognizable and a sequential pattern “across writing sessions and across students” which involved prewriting, writing and editing (“Composing” 328). For this reason, teachers should look beyond the grammar and usage errors to avoid becoming bogged down in them, as doing so may lead to local obsessions among young unskilled writers. Instead, teachers of composition should respond to errors by seeking “positive motivations” rather than a single “negative motivation” (Haswell 311).

In short, Perl seeks to change the way teachers think about writing by pointing out that poor writing does not always reflect a poor grasp of the rules. She observes that as basic writers compose, the process of composition and revision confounds such a simple and convenient connection between usage knowledge and the errors on the paper. Perl believes that to get to the bottom of the problem, more investigation is required:

These unskilled college writers are not beginners in a tabula rasa sense, and teachers err in assuming they are. The results of this study suggest that teachers may first need to identify which characteristic components of
each student’s process facilitate writing and which inhibit it before further
teaching takes place. (“Composing” 334)

Perl echoes Haswell and Bartholomae, who have both shown how essays full of errors—
despite being considered poor work by many English teachers—reveal that the writers
followed an internal set of rules. These researchers stress that the skills of writers need
acknowledgement, that to ignore what a student knows, good or bad, interrupts the
teaching and learning process. Moreover, a stringent focus on rules and mistakes may
have very serious consequences. Connie Weaver writes, “When we ignore effort, ignore
growth, ignore the writer’s soul, and place such a high premium on mechanics, the
burden of failure becomes too much to bear for many of our students” (263).

Among ELLs, teachers and tutors err in the same way, for they keep teaching
students the basic rules of grammar when most ELLs know English grammar better than
many native speakers. For most ELLs, the reason errors are repeated has little to do with
ignorance of grammar rules. Rather, the errors are the result of subconscious processes,
some embedded deeply at a very early age, preventing well-known grammar rules from
becoming naturally integrated into everyday speech. These kinds of problems are the
result of a condition called fossilization, which occurs when ELLs, after developing ways
to bridge one language to another by creating a temporary or go-between language called
an “interlanguage” (or contact variety), get stuck on the bridge, and the interlanguage
form becomes fossilized in their speech. In these situations, the learner has great
difficulty unlearning the morpheme, word or phrase no matter how much instruction is
received.
The findings from these process studies emphasize that revision is a complex process with many moving parts. The recursiveness observed by these prominent researchers suggests that the revising process, in the right hands, unifies the various aspects of revision, so much so that the acts of revision should be considered more of a simultaneous process than a linear one. Accordingly, the back and forth movement between local and global features occurs so rapidly that making alterations on the run is challenging for any level of writer, and helps to explain why so many ELLs get stuck on one aspect of revising.

Most important, the ELL struggling with revision, like many basic writers, may be a very skilled writer but is simply caught up with practices that lead nowhere. As Perl argued for basic writers, it is vital to acknowledge their efforts and writing experience before trying to “fix” them. Take Zamel’s least skilled writer, for example. Zamel’s study involved students from Zamel’s own advanced ELL composition class, a class requiring two semesters of freshman composition, so all students in the study had experience and apparent success in the classroom—including the least skilled writer—and were considered advanced ELLs. The students in the study demonstrated eagerness toward learning, as they volunteered for the study partly because they were all interested in receiving additional analysis of their writing, which the study promised to provide. Certainly Zamel’s least skilled writer not only was an enthusiastic participant in Zamel’s study but also was a skilled writer in many ways, despite having difficulties with revision. In fact, Raimes questions Zamel’s “unskilled” label for her because Raimes views her as “skilled,” having taken and passed the two semesters of English composition: “Unskilled relative to whom and according to what criteria?” (232). A
panel of judges, faculty members who were experienced in grading essays, had scored the essays written by the subjects, but Raimes is wondering what criteria the judges used in deeming the essays unskilled. This is an interesting aspect of composition that complicates any discussion about revision: That writing, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

The point—a similar point Perl, Bartholomae, and Shaughnessy all seem to be making as well—is that Zamel’s least skilled writer and Perl’s Tony, although they had challenges revising and producing texts, especially when compared to other writers within the same studies or when judged by researchers, deserve to be approached by their peers and teachers in a respectful way that acknowledges the knowledge and experience they have demonstrated as writers. Second, these struggling writers struggled not only because of a lack of skills, but also because revision is a difficult beast to tame for any writer. Zamel’s least skilled writer and Tony had difficulty with their final texts, and, thus, with the revising process altogether. This point stresses that peers and teachers should avoid approaching a struggling ELL with what Barbara Flores calls a “deficit perspective,” a perspective that “rarely looks at the strengths of these students but focuses instead on what they lack and what teachers and schools need to ‘fix’” (qtd. in Weaver 262). In the next chapter, with the aim of trying to figure out how to help struggling writers like Zamel’s least skilled writer and Perl’s Tony—without a deficit perspective—we will look at how writers tackle some of the challenges they encounter during the process of revising, and, more specifically, how ELLs transcend the point struggling writers get stuck at.
CHAPTER 2
HURDLES OF REVISION

The recursion model, as compared to the stage model, anticipates the linguistic nature of the writer—composing is “not just happening to a page of text but something happening within the cognitive apparatus of the writer” (Haar 18). Situated within cognitive functions, the composing process operates in the same location as language. In this chapter we will consider how varying degrees of language competency relate to the revising process by examining revising strategies of skilled native writers and ELLs, emphasizing the special hurdles faced by ELLs.

Skilled writers look at revision in a positive way: “Rewriting is when playwriting really gets to be fun,” says Neil Simon (qtd. in Murray 2). And Ellen Goodman describes rewriting as something that makes her happy because it is like cleaning house, “getting things in the right order, tightening things up” (qtd. in Murray 3). More specifically, Witte describes the process as one in which skilled writers eliminate unnecessary topic sentences, and add more detailed information to the remaining topics, so that a “clear focus” is maintained (330). Witte is careful to point out, though, that it is not the number of topic sentences that make the difference between a high and low quality text, but the manner in which the topic sentences connect to each other, achieving either a “local or global coherence” (331).

Coherence is achieved through the frequent use of cohesive ties, such as conjunctions, conjunctive adverbs and subordinating conjunctions (Witte 192). Skilled
writers, according to Witte, typically employ more cohesive devices than less skilled writers employ. He found that in highly rated essays “31.7% of all words contribute to explicit cohesive ties while only 20.4% of the words in the low-rated essays contribute to such ties” (196). Witte reasons that the presence of cohesive ties relates to the expansiveness of the information: The more expansive information, the more necessary cohesive ties become (197). He cautions, however, that a text can contain plenty of cohesive ties and still not be coherent because coherence is dependent upon the reader, not the text alone.

Finally, skilled writers try to imagine how readers understand their work. One way they do this is by reading out loud. “Listening to what your voice is saying,” is a crucial part of revision according to Donald Murray (54). Murray also advocates the use of test readers “to make sure we have read what is on the page” (33). Pliny the Younger frequently read his letters to a close group of friends to elicit their feedback. Accordingly, Pliny’s letters were developed the same way someone might write a speech:

When he proposed publishing an oration he had delivered, he first revised it carefully, then read it aloud to two or three friends. [After revising] he submitted it to others to annotate. . . . [These] he discussed judicially with one or two other friends. Finally he read the oration to a considerable group, with sharp attention to individual reactions, and revised it with the most discriminating care. (Andrews 145)

While reading or reciting, Pliny watched the reactions of the listeners very carefully, noting “changes of expression . . . slight movements of the head, low murmurs, and even silence” (Andrews 146). Most classical literature was written for a live audience, not
necessarily to be read as books are read today, so taking into consideration how the audience responded to the spoken word was important to Pliny, and familiar to him as an orator. In sum, revising is an integral part of composition for skilled writers. Skilled writers hold a positive view towards revising, seeing it as an opportunity to improve their work, and skilled writers pay close attention to coherence by reading aloud their text and by seeking test readers.

Interestingly, the activities skilled native writers do during the composing process—cleaning, ordering, tightening, tying, and watching—resemble the kinds of activities involved in courting. One cleans up, puts clothes in some sort of order to determine what to wear, tightens and ties up loose fitting garments, and then watches the reactions of others for clues as to whether their outfit is good or bad. In other words, the person courting pays close attention to his or her outfit to impress someone in particular. In writing, the same kind of operations takes place. Both dressing for a date and revising are connected intimately with others, and this connection provides most of the motivation for such time-intensive proceedings.

For ELLs, however, such a motivation may not exist, for, according to Stegemoller, the ELLs’ L1 and prior experiences with language may not be valued in some host environments, thus threatening the linguistic resources of the writer (61). In addition, the individual’s relationship with his or her audience may not exist in the same way it may exist for typical writers; in other words, the relationship might be strained, as in the case of many ELLs who consider their audiences to be in opposition to their culture and views (Coles and Wall 312). Deprived of resources and of any hope for a positive reception, the individual understandably lacks the necessary motivation to think of
writing in terms of audience or in terms of communication or community. Accordingly, an ELL’s writing might be loose, sloppy, disconnected or full of assumptions, not because of a lack of skill but because of a lack of motivation.

In addition to a lack of motivation, ELLs must overcome many challenges that require going above and beyond what skilled writers do. First, much more effort is required while composing in an L2, as Tony Silva points out:

It is clear that L2 composing is more constrained, more difficult, and less effective. L2 writers did less planning (global and local) and had more difficulty with setting goals and generating and organizing material. Their transcribing was more laborious, less fluent, and less productive—perhaps reflective of a lack of lexical resources. They reviewed, reread, and reflected on their written texts less, revised more—but with more difficulty and were less able to revise intuitively. (qtd. in Kietlinska 65)

Revision for ELLs may not be easy or fun considering the extra effort required, and consistent success may be elusive. Indeed, despite the diligent and enthusiastic work of Zamel’s skilled writers, their essays were far from perfect according to Zamel.

Second, as discussed, good essays tend to have more cohesive devices than poor essays; however, ELLs have been shown to be extremely repetitive in the use of these devices, tend to misuse definite and indefinite articles, and to use words such as “furthermore,” and “nevertheless” infrequently (Liu, Braine 634). And any use of these devices to communicate semantics and pragmatics is very difficult and time consuming to master according to Liu and Braine, so it is more likely they are misused or not used at all in this way (635). Finally, as Witte believes, the use of cohesive devices is difficult to
master because they “must conform to a reader’s expectations for particular types of texts and the reader’s knowledge of the world” (201). To illustrate this point, Witte provides an obvious example of four sentences that employ textual redundancy:

The quarterback threw the ball toward the tight end. Balls are used in many sports. Most balls are spheres, but a football is an ellipsoid. The tight end leaped to catch the ball. (201)

Clearly, the sentences do not relate to each other in any way because “the reader cannot construct what Fillmore calls a real-world scene for it; that is, ‘the text neither seems to have a clear purpose nor appears to meet the needs of any given audience’” (qtd. in Witte 201). No doubt ELLs would not write such sentences, but it is not difficult to imagine how an ELL could have difficulty with cohesive ties in a similar way, whereas it is doubtful that native writers would struggle so.

Third, native writers rely upon their own voice and the voice of others to determine their text’s accuracy and appropriateness, but ELLs, for the most part, do not have such an option. Some researchers believe that ELLs prefer to avoid peer editing because they do not trust the opinions of their peers and experience embarrassment from their poor English skills, and some maintain that peer editing is not as effective for L2 speakers as native speakers (Kietlinska 79, 80). In addition, while reading aloud to oneself is effective, it is very time consuming and demanding for L2 speakers, as Yin Ping demonstrated when she spent an enormous amount of time trying to understand written directions. No matter how many times something is repeated, many ELLs are unable to decipher it without help. Such helplessness echoes basic writers who
desperately require the help of teachers because they “had been taught to mistrust what ‘sounded’ right to them” (Perl, “Composing” 332). Perl observes:

When they attempted corrections by sound, they became confused, and they began to have difficulty differentiating between what sounded right in speech and what needed to be marked on the paper. (“Composing” 332)

For this reason, many ELLs cannot do what Murray recommends and read out loud to determine accuracy. Instead, they rely on alternative means, such as tutors or teachers, or face the prospect of failure.

Lastly, some hurdles ELLs face relate to the negative effects of bilingualism. Writing in one’s second language is not the same as writing in one’s native language, no matter how accomplished one is (Valdés 414). Many studies have shown that the brain processes a native language differently from a second language (Bolger and Zapata 6). Native grammar, for instance, generally functions subconsciously, where it is located in “procedural memory” somewhere within the frontal lobes of the brain; therefore, it is not as easily forgotten as, say, vocabulary, which is located in declarative memory housed in the temporal lobe of the brain (Bolger and Zapata 5-6). Pinsky observes that he has never seen a child make a mistake using the words “Down” and “Up,” as in “Can you put me up?” and Don’t put me down,” and “I wasn’t brought up that way” (3). He concludes that if we had to learn these distinctions with charts and rules we would not be successful (4). Weaver calls this kind of knowledge about language operational grammar, “our unconscious knowledge of grammar that enables us to communicate with other speakers of the same language” (12).
Yet some erosion of L1 vocabulary and operational grammar has been shown among bilinguals, particularly ELLs who learn a second language at quite a young age: “Over time, contact varieties of language are often characterized by loss, addition, and replacement of linguistic features” (Valdés 415). Information such as stored vocabulary is susceptible to erosion. As a result, ELLs are unable to rely on their native language as much for language transfer, which can aid in the production of L2 grammar and syntax structures. Chi-Hwa transferred ideas directly from her native language, but if she had learned English at a very young age, she may not have been able to rely on her native language for much help because of L1 attrition or erosion. Thus, while bilinguals have many advantages, sometimes these L1 losses impact a bilingual’s ability to process L2 tasks such as revision.

Finally, fluency is a big problem among ELLs during revision. One of the skills Raimes’s revisers lacked is English fluency. For this reason, they only produced a single draft because the act of L2 writing was “exhausting” (Raimes 245). As mentioned, Silva pointed out that ELLs lacked lexical resources, which could account for such sparseness. Zamel’s least skilled writer composed for a relatively short period of time possibly because she too lacked the necessary vocabulary, and so her final draft was not much different from her first draft. Tony also had trouble expressing ideas and expanding on his first draft possibly because of fluency difficulties as well.

Yet Raimes pointed out how Perl’s students demonstrated more language fluency than her students demonstrated, yet Raimes’s students were more successful composing. In other words, writers with higher levels of language fluency will not necessarily be more successful than writers with lower levels of fluency. Raimes concludes that it is the
act of writing and not the level of proficiency that determines whether text will be
generated or not. Raimes believes there are three possible explanations for her students’
superior revising performances: First, it could be the “nature of the narrative task” (246).
Second, students are more concerned with their ideas than with accuracy. Third,
composing aloud distracted the writers so that they focused more on ideas than local
errors. Raimes’s findings suggest that ELLs can overcome their linguistic deficits
because her writers who lacked many of the proficiencies observed in Perl’s students
produced higher quality texts. Still, lacking adequate fluency can create an
insurmountable hurdle for many ELLs.

With so many challenges, it is not surprising that many ELLs drop out of school
eyearly. In fact, the drop out rate, according to Language Magazine is twenty-five percent
for an ELL, while it is only fifteen percent for a student not classified as an ELL. In
addition, the magazine reports that the longer a student is classified an ELL, the more
likely the student will drop out of school. For these reasons, it is important that
struggling students like Zamel’s least skilled writer and Perl’s Tony get help to overcome
the challenges discussed thus far.

Teachers of composition frequently make grammar and usage a central focal point
during composition class because they fail to recognize the grammar expertise of many of
their students. In part, this is because these same students produce texts riddled with
errors. This scenario creates a cyclical problem limiting the student’s potential as pointed
out by Weaver (262). Part of the solution may be to train students to self-correct
grammar errors. If students can learn to present papers without blatant errors, teachers
may be less inclined to repeatedly teach grammar.
In a study by Chandrasegaran, ELLs demonstrated that they could correct both local and global errors, some on their own, but others only after a teacher prompted the corrections by simply reading the text to students and, then, by emphasizing the errors aloud. From the first three paragraphs of ten essays, a total of 150 errors occurred, of which ninety-one were surface errors and fifty-nine global errors. Sixty-percent of the total accounted for surface errors, and thirty-nine percent of the total accounted for global errors, resulting in 1.5 local errors per global error. This rate is similar to the rate of error in Raimes. During the first stage in which students made corrections without any help from their teachers, students corrected only 15.3 percent of the total errors (32). Most of these corrected errors related to tense and verb forms, but six percent related to global errors, classified as Problems of Reader Interpretability (PRI).

During stage two in which the “teacher then read the revised text aloud to subject who was instructed to listen for anything that did not sound right to him,” the writers corrected 11.3 percent of the total remaining errors, less than five-percent relating to PRI. Lastly, during stage three, after the teacher “located and identified the errors for the subject but did not tell him how to correct it,” twenty-four percent of the total errors were corrected, 11.3 percent of these related to PRI, specifically “semantic inappropriateness” (34). The ratios of global errors over local errors decreased as the students’ awareness of the errors increased—in fact, the percent of global errors decreased faster than the percent of local errors, eventually inverting the ratio.

According to Chandrasegaran, these findings demonstrate two important points: First, ELLs can correct a “fair proportion” of errors, both local and global. Second, ELLs
are “keener for some types of errors and PRI than for others” (36). Chandrasegaran concludes that ELLs tend to more easily repair local errors:

As expected, more errors in grammar and usage than PRI were identified and put right by the students themselves. The corrections made were overwhelmingly changes at the word or clause level. Except for one student who tried to improve cohesion by rearranging the order of four sentences in a paragraph, there were no other attempts at re-writing or re-arrangement of whole sentences to improve cohesion or correct focus. (37)

Chandrasegaran believes that “the tendency to overlook text-level problems during revision” should be expected because students are taught to focus primarily on word and sentence level corrections, not PRI (38). For the most part, the students in this study were primarily unskilled ELLs like the writers in Raimes’s study.

This study relates to our findings in Chapter One because it parallels the actions of the struggling writers. For instance, most of the writers in Chandrasegaran’s study tended to focus on local errors rather than global errors during the first stage of corrections. This is similar to Zamel’s least skilled writer who saw the expression of ideas as something teachers were not concerned with, so, accordingly, focused on local features (Zamel 181). Perl’s Tony, as mentioned, made 234 total changes, of which only 24 involved global features. This is a much larger ratio than Chandrasegaran’s, however. Instead of 1.5, it is 8.75 local revisions for every global revision, suggesting a much more serious flaw. Perl in “Understanding Composing” thinks that writers who write with such a local focus are not being faithful to themselves; they see writing as following a set of rules, not necessarily as a personal expression (368).
Another point of comparison between Chapter One and Chandrasegaran is that of determination. The improvement noted by Chandrasegaran is remarkable. On their own, the students corrected 15 percent of their errors, and after the instructor pointed out the errors, they corrected 24 percent of the errors. By contrast, it is doubtful that our two struggling writers corrected 15 percent of their errors, and it is also doubtful that they would have been able to do better had the researchers pointed the errors out. The reason for this is their level of demonstrated determination. Chandrasegaran’s writers appear to be very motivated, like many international writers, but our struggling writers apparently were not. Finally, and most importantly, Chandrasegaran’s study shows that students did not require additional grammar lessons to self-correct, only the gentle telescopic nudging of a teacher who simply points the students towards the errors. In the next chapter, we will discuss how linguistic background impacts revision and motivation, which should help explain our struggling writers’ lack of determination.
CHAPTER 3

REVISION AT THE BOTTOM

It is remarkable that many writers emerge from a shy childhood, such as E.B. White, but it is probably more remarkable that many do not. Language, on one hand is easy because most of us learn to speak effortlessly, and even writing and reading are skills that come easily to most people without too much anxiety and trouble. Even learning a foreign language can be fun. But, on the other hand, for many ELLs, learning English is a necessity, failure a heavy load. According to Tallon, when a bilingual ELL performs poorly in a language class, even a native language class, it can result in a loss of motivation, behavioral issues, and a disconnection from mainstream society similar to the bottom writers Haswell describes in “Dark Shadows: The Fate of Writers at the Bottom” (Tallon 74). In this chapter we will discuss how Zamel’s least skilled writer and Perl’s Tony relate to bottom writers in the way they resist revision. In addition, we will discuss how my revision practices relate to bottom writers, and, additionally, how I negotiate my mono-linguistic identity from a “tricky space,” having been raised by bilingual parents (Ortmeier-Hooper 391).

Richard H. Haswell coined the expression, “bottom writers,” a phrase that represents writers who typically receive very low scores, possibly writers like Zamel’s least skilled writer and Perl’s Tony (311). Haswell explains that these writers are deemed incompetent and, therefore, do not see themselves as competing with their own peers: “With bottom students, noncompetition may be more familiar [than competition]. Even
if they have not been put out of the regular classrooms and into special cubicles, they still know they do not compete with their peers” (310).

The struggling writers discussed thus far resemble Haswell’s bottom writers. Zamel’s least skilled writer had an unlimited amount of time to complete her essay and drafts, yet she chose to limit her composing and revising time to four hours, despite knowing the final draft was not correct. Second, she began her essay without any written plans even though she “seemed to view writing as a straightforward expansion of such a plan” (Zamel 176). Third, in a revealing moment, she asked for permission to add something to her essay in contrast to the skilled writers who “were well aware that they could leave half-finished thoughts and return to them later” (176). Lastly, she clearly thought that parts of her essay did not make sense to readers, yet did not even try to make sense of these questionable parts since her final draft was a basic copy of her original.

In contrast to Zamel’s least skilled writer, Tony spent the most time composing his essays compared to other writers in his group, and spent significant amounts of time pre-writing. Despite the extra time, Tony “concluded the composing process with unresolved stylistic and syntactic problems” (Perl, “Composing” 328). In other words, Tony handed in his essays unfinished. Perl’s Tony acts like a performer who experiences an extreme case of stage fright, and, then, takes incremental steps to alleviate the overwhelming feelings of discomfort. Perl observes that when he began an essay, he had a comfortable distance between himself and his discourse or audience, but by the time he finished, all of that distance vanished (327). In other words, he perceived the audience out there, and himself as separate from the audience, for he was on the stage. However, he did not feel very comfortable for long, sooner or later withdrawing into his own world.
In his new, safer position, he does not have to be concerned with how others understand his words, as long as he understands them. Perl observes:

[Tony and other writers generally] took the reader’s understanding for granted. They did not see the necessity of making their referents explicit, of making the connections among their ideas apparent, of carefully and explicitly relating one phenomenon to another, or of placing narratives or generalizations within an orienting, conceptual framework. (Perl, “Composing” 332)

What Tony understands to be important is surface errors, just like Zamel’s least skilled writer, so he spends an “enormous amount of time . . . in rereading and repetition” but only to make surface changes as noted earlier (Perl, “Composing” 328).

Space between bottom writers and their audiences, or their peers, exists for many complicated reasons, some linguistically related, some specific to basic writers. But space might also be created by poor revision practices discussed in Chapter One and Two, such as maintaining a premature focus on local textual features that chokes out ideas and organization; getting stuck on one aspect of revision, such as meaning or grammar; being unable to do more than one thing at a time; limiting one’s reading to words and sentences, thus being unable to take in a broader horizon; being too concerned with accuracy in both understanding instructions and conveying ideas, which suggests the reader-writer is fearful to take risks; and finally, lacking trust in one’s own voice and in the voice of others.

Teachers contribute to the space by making students feel inadequate by focusing on basic composition and grammar instruction and by pointing out grammar errors.
without acknowledging content, effort and skill. In addition, a movement away from a process approach to a less expressive, less explorative approach in composition instruction might be making it more difficult for struggling ELLs as well. While the process approach may have proven to be too explorative and lacking in structure, as Raimes and Kietlinska maintain, many aspects of the process approach should not be discarded—namely, the idea that revision entails the working out of ideas, requiring exploration and plenty of time.

Although unfinished and incomplete texts are not an uncommon event, when a text demonstrates a lack of effort, a certain acknowledgment of defeat, the reader should take notice because it might mean that the writer has surrendered, has given up trying to share his or her meaning, and has accepted the fate of a bottom writer. In Haswell’s case, bottom writers somehow produced remarkable texts, but many bottom writers suffer a far worse fate: “After years of low expectations, red marks on the paper, and low or failing grades, students begin to see learning as unnatural, teachers as adversarial, and schools as unsafe” (Weaver 262).

When I returned to school in my middle forties, I was very excited because I thought that nothing could stop me from learning to become an “educated” reader and writer. Sooner or later, however, I learned that the education I had abandoned in my youth—sometime after 7th grade—could not be regained no matter how much I studied as a mature adult (I actually remained in school and graduated from college, but with a technical, not academic, focus). I have come to believe that just as multiplication tables are memorized around the second or third grade, and students taught to read by first or second grade, the foundations of literature must be laid early, certainly no later than
secondary school, or else one flounders attempting to lay it oneself. Certainly this was the experience for me, no matter what course of instruction I took.

Lacking a serious literature background, everything I read as an older adult in junior college and college was new to me. While I enjoyed the books, I could not remember them for long, particularly the details, and, more importantly, I had great difficulty placing what I read in larger contexts, such as historical literary periods. Just as successfully learning a second language becomes less and less likely the older one becomes, studying literature for me was tenuous. Perhaps I am exaggerating this because I did get through my classes well enough to earn good grades, but my experiences made me feel, and continue to make me feel, like a bottom learner, one who does not seem to get it as well as younger students who most likely studied literature intensely while in secondary school.

In addition to my struggles with literature, I have had trouble building up my vocabulary and appropriating literary terms. When I look up an unknown word, I am unable to remember the word’s meaning for very long, and, worse, I have extreme difficulty recalling these words when composing or trying to use them in a meaningful way; it is one thing to recognize and understand the gist of a word seen in print and another thing to put the word into practice. While I find learning to be exciting, I also find it to be very difficult, even frustrating. Many times I have been guilty of turning in unfinished, incomplete essays because I could not do anything more with them, no matter how much I tried. In this way I am similar to Zamel’s least skilled writer and Tony. One bright spot for me, however, is poetry because, as I understand it, words should be simple
and concise in poems; there is no room for wordiness. On the bright side, these experiences have given me patience with struggling writers.

Some of my struggles concerning my resistance to revision also involve my own unique experiences acquiring English. In many ways I am like many ELLs, who while living in an English speaking society, experience a completely different language and culture at home. For most of my life, however, I perceived myself as a gringo, a surfer, a southern Californian who had lived in Orange County all his life. In fact, as a child, my complexion was fair and my hair light. In taking up surfing at about the age of twelve, my hair bleached blonde during summers. All of my friends were native English speakers, and mostly Caucasian, just as I considered myself. In my estimation, my neighborhood, for the most part, consisted of English speaking Caucasian natives, typical of most Huntington Beach neighborhoods during the early 1970s, typical of many coastal neighborhoods today.

But my perceptions of myself do not reflect my linguistic background fairly, nor do they reflect my ethnic or cultural background. They are simply the way I have always thought of myself because of the environment I grew up in. According to Robert Brooke, we have two identities, the one we assign to ourselves, the other assigned to us by “our environment and social interaction” (qtd. in Ortmeier-Hooper 391). I suppose my surfer identity is the result of my environment, and that identity is being replaced with a self-assigned identity, based upon new experiences and self-knowledge. While this process seems positive—or self-actualizing—for me it is actually frightening because it involves the acknowledgement of loss.
Through the years, I have come to recognize, sometimes painfully, a new identity. This identity is not that of a gringo surfer, not even that of a native of this land. Actually, I am only twenty-five percent gringo (or Caucasian), and I was born in Puerto Rico. My mother is a native Spanish speaker from Puerto Rico. In fact, my father’s mother was also from the Caribbean and spoke Spanish as well. I did not know this because my father is very fair, had been born and raised in New York and California, and is a native English speaker (although his linguistic past is somewhat a mystery to me as he does speak Spanish but more of a school-taught Spanish, though probably influenced by his mother). Unfortunately, I never met my father’s mother who had died when my father was only thirteen, but I met my father’s dad, who was a native English speaker from Florida and Caucasian.

I suppose, my shifting identity, the result of complex ethnic and linguistic influences—at least complex to me—has an impact on the way I revise, on the way I interpret English words and respond to their sounds as I read them aloud, particularly since English came to me in a different way compared with the way most traditional native speakers experience English. Maria Treglia contends that the comments of teachers affect the way students revise, Gerald Graff argues that what one reads determines one’s ability (or inability) to write in academic settings, and Yagelski believes that how a student revises has a lot to do with “how strategies are applied by teachers and interpreted by students (Yagelski 232). If revising can be influenced so much by these external factors, then certainly self-identity must influence how one revises as well. Is not this the intention of ELL programs, to take one’s linguistic identity into consideration by tailoring composition programs to all sorts of individuals?
As mentioned, I do not see myself in any of the above ELL categories. In addition, I do not like the idea at all that I am possibly different from others, especially different from those representing the majority language in the United States, English, and I do not like the fact that I am being forced to contend with a new identity, at least that is how I feel about it. As mentioned, some ELLs do feel ashamed about their first language or heritage. Not surprisingly, I relate to Kate Chopin’s “Desiree’s Baby,” and Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson* in which characters react violently towards themselves and others when faced with the mere possibility that their own blood may be tainted. On the other hand, in contrast to my resistance and anger, sometimes I feel gently drawn towards ethnic writers such as Richard Rodriguez, who conveys beautifully in books like the *Hunger of Memory* the tensions that I experience in my own life, even though most are just coming to the surface of my consciousness.

Yet my life is very different from Richard Rodriguez because as far as I know, I never knew Spanish, not one word. In fact, attempting to learn Spanish for me as an adult was not easy at all, for I was a complete beginner. The only advantage I may have had was that the sounds of Spanish, at least some words, were familiar to me, but there is so much more to a language than words. Richard Rodriguez, a native Spanish speaker exchanged Spanish for English and suffered a subsequent loss of the intimacy Spanish had given him. He longs for the memory of that intimacy, as the title of his novel implies. If anything, the only loss I know of is the growing sense that I am losing my identity as a native English speaker, as a surfer from southern California, the more I come to terms with my ethnic, cultural and linguistic past: “You feel most foreign when you no longer belong where you did” (Bowen 172). I could not lose what I never had, but, on
the other hand, my experiences as a child involved an exposure to Spanish, something that clearly affects how I read, and, therefore, must have some impact on how I revise and how I resist revision. Any association with a language considered inferior by the host country may have negative ramifications unless there is adequate support for the non-dominant language. Any discrepancy between a self-imposed identity and an assigned identity potentially can drive anyone towards the bottom, unless of course one has the courage to ignore or to accept such a predicament.

In conclusion, I possess many talents in the area of English literature, but, at the same time, I recognize severe deficiencies that derive from the low level of literacy exposure (and possibly my linguistic experiences) I had in my pre-school years, and later as well. For this reason, sometimes I see myself as a bottom writer like I see Zamel’s least skilled writer and Perl’s Tony. I sense that I am not as capable nor am I as worthy to speak up and share my perspective of things. As Rodriguez admitted, he lacked a point of view as he struggled shifting his speaking and reading voice from Spanish to English; I sense that I am losing any point of view I may have had as a self proclaimed English native because I am shifting from English towards a cosmopolitan identity, at least that is a nice way of looking at it. Such a feeling or sensation is partly reflected by Max, who in Bowen’s *The House in Paris*, cries, “My lack of a home, of any place to return to, had not only deprived me, it chagrined me constantly” (Bowen 179).

My father had a brain injury when he was only twenty-three years old serving in the U.S. Coast Guard. As a result, he was left with severe stroke-like effects. This injury left our family in a critical state and certainly may have had a bigger impact on my language development than anything else. My father’s injury resulted in a home without
many books, without many adult visitors, and without much meaningful conversation. Most of my language development occurred through school and friends. While I do feel fortunate to have been exposed to a great deal of literature after having spent many years pursuing a college English education after turning forty-four, I do have a sense of loss about the many years that I “suffered” away from literature. Moreover, I believe that once years are lost, especially formative years, there is nothing one can do to make up for them. In the final chapter, I will try to show that what determines success in composing is not so much the way in which ELLs are identified or parsed as it is how teachers approach them and perceive them, while keeping in mind that early intervention is also very important.
CHAPTER 4

TEACHERS AND REVISION

In short, this thesis has pointed out revision practices of skilled writers, both L1 and L2 learners, and compared them with the practices of unskilled L2 learners. One difference involves the way writers begin the revising process. Typically, skilled writers start by rearranging and deleting vast amounts of texts, changes that substantially affect meaning (Faigley and Witte 407). Unskilled writers, on the contrary, make changes that affect meaning very little, instead opting to concern themselves with grammar and usage issues (Faigley and Witte 407). In part, as a result of these disparate approaches, final drafts of skilled writers differ dramatically from original drafts, while those of unskilled writers do not differ much. Not surprising, skilled writers spent a lot more time composing and usually produced lengthier texts. Part of the reason for the narrower focus of the unskilled writers is a premature concern for accuracy, presumably the result of overly zealous grammar teachers, conveying a sense that papers free of surface errors deserve more attention and respect than papers full of errors because ideas are subordinate to neatness. Our thesis suggested that such an attitude likely derives from a stage-model orientation of composing, one that identifies with the products of composing, as opposed to a process model, which typically is concerned with the cognitive and linguistic aspects of composing, that is, what is going on in the mind of the writer during revision.
It is surprising how the practices of skilled native writers and skilled L2 writers differ little, that writing in a second language is similar to writing in one’s native language. While this thesis pointed out differences and challenges between L1 and L2 composers, in the end, both groups shared many similarities—rereading text, reading aloud, and repetition, for example. Perhaps this is because, as Zamel observes, “the linguistic problems seemed to concern the students the least” (175). In addition, as discussed briefly, generally L2 proficiency levels had little correlation to textual quality (Raimes 250; Zamel 183). For instance, some writers with high L2 proficiency, such as Zamel’s least skilled writer and Perl’s Tony, produced sparse amounts of poor quality text, while students with relatively very poor L2 proficiency produced higher quality text than students with higher proficiencies. In other words, the student’s level of familiarity with the language has less impact on the text than other factors, such as their level of determination discussed in Chapter Three. Another of these factors is the impact language teachers have on students, as both Weaver and Perl claim. Accordingly, in this chapter, we will discuss ways teachers impact L2 learners and steps teachers can take to help L2 students compose more effectively.

This thesis suggests that teachers are responsible for many writing problems because they frequently cannot see beyond mistakes. Many grammar and usage mistakes are easy to identify because they “glare,” while mistakes of coherence and cohesiveness take much more time and effort to identify, according to Haswell (311). Like killing ants as opposed to cockroaches, English teachers swat at easy to identify grammar mistakes, occasionally producing a slaughter of both text and writer in the process. It takes a tough soul to withstand the relentless attacks of an insensitive composition teacher, in part
because in the writer’s mind many grammar mistakes seem minor compared to the “great” ideas represented within the error-riddled sentence. Why does not the teacher take a look at the idea before staining it with red ink? What is the big deal about a missed comma or a misspelled word?

One easy step teachers could take to help eliminate an obsession with local textual features would be to stop making grammar corrections. If teachers stopped coloring words and sentences with red, blue, or black ink—the color does not matter—students might not think, as Zamel’s least skilled writer did, that perfect grammar is the only thing—or the most important thing—English teachers care about. Additionally, another step would be called for: teachers should stop handing out grammar worksheets. However, this would be difficult to do since worksheets are an integral part of a student’s day. Some recommend neither of these steps, believing that grammar instruction and correction remain an important component of composition studies. For instance, Kietlinska opposes curtailing teacher feedback because “L2 students perceive themselves as foreign language learners, they tend to be less intimidated and stigmatized by errors. Moreover, students strongly expect feedback and may react with disappointment if they don’t get it” (72).

In addition, Kietlinska calls for the continued practice of correcting grammar mistakes by marking student’s papers, arguing that the practice leads to self-correction. Kietlinska writes:

The standard process advocates’ arguments that corrections stifle students’ creativity and willingness to take risks are culturally misguided. This very
American assumption that our students’ self-esteem is fragile and can easily be damaged by criticism is simply wrong. (75)

Undoubtedly, Kietlinska is being very insensitive to the needs of many ELLs, in particular, to ELLs who may perceive themselves as being in opposition to their teachers’ views, even before receiving negative teacher feedback—bottom writers, for instance. Besides, research suggests that Kietlinska may be incorrect. In fact, she even admits that studies shed doubt on the long-term efficacy of grammatical teacher feedback (74). Weaver writes, “The fact that correction just doesn’t work to teach Standard English grammar comes as no surprise to anyone familiar with linguistic research” (238).

Contrary to what Kietlinska believes, L2 learners can be easily damaged by criticism—and so can many others.

I still possess an English paper from junior high school (it is not dated, so this is an estimate) in which I write, “Jud’s opinion of his father, which was never very high, sinks lower. . . . Once on the farm, however, Jud grows to like living there, with his few friends and pets” (Appendix A). These sentences are written very neatly in cursive; they include the use of an unrestrictive clause correctly set off with commas, and demonstrate however being used correctly. Interestingly, I received a “B minus” for the paper with the following comment: “Did you write this without any help from anyone?” I wonder why my teacher suspected that I received help from home. Was it because my language skills and writing skills at school were of a lower quality or because the style and content indicated an older adult helped? My teacher implied that I did not write the work alone; however, I never had help from anyone at home, ever. In addition, the final sentence of the paper contains an obvious error, one in which an adult would certainly have
corrected, had an adult been involved. I wonder how my teacher’s comment affected me at the time. Her comment also seems to be suggesting that the paper was well written, so well written that an adult had written it. I suppose this is a compliment of sorts.

I had a similar experience while I was attending junior college for the first time right out of high school to study music. On the front page of the paper my English teacher wrote, “You did not write this! See me,” and gave me an F. After picking myself off of the ground, I visited him and showed him evidence of my work, including two or three hand-written drafts, and books related to my subject that I had purchased, marked up, and used extensively as sources. After seeing this evidence and listening to my defense, he changed my grade for the paper to an A. As far as I remember, he did not apologize, however. I wonder how many times English teachers make unfounded accusations against innocent, young students.

Looking back on these personal experiences in English class, through the lens of a shifting self-identity, I really wonder if these accusations were based on prejudice. Haswell gave ninety-six essays to a group of seven university professors to score and found that nine essays received low scores with very little deviation in scoring, apparently because of flagrant errors. The nine papers that received the highest scores, however, had much more deviation in the scores. Haswell reasons that the errors in the lower-scored essays were easier to identify, that English teachers tend to agree on what is considered poor writing while they do not agree as much on what constitutes good writing. More than this, Haswell says, “Let me be blunt and say that high concordance on low holistic scores looks awfully like stereotyping” (314). If teachers judge essays to be poor without evidence, perhaps they tend to make claims of plagiarism without
evidence as well, especially in cases where the writer might not look like, act like or speak like an accomplished writer. While I could try to justify my teachers’ accusations, I cannot hide the fact that they misused their authoritative position by doubting the authenticity of a young writer without any material evidence. I only wonder why they made the judgments they made. Did they base their suspicions on my speech, my appearance, or earlier work?

These experiences show how teachers tend to correlate a student’s non-writing behaviors with writing abilities, and, more than this, how the comments of teachers can make students feel uncomfortable, contrary to what Kietlinska believes. As a result of teacher’s comments, L2 students frequently think about grammar and usage during the composing process, so much so that they forget about organization, cohesiveness and global coherence. So many of the findings of this thesis point to how teachers make a difference, both good and bad. When teachers lack awareness and sensitivity many L2 students simply fade out or drop out. From this perspective, ELL classifications are not as important as teacher sensitivity and teacher education. This thesis seems to suggest that if more focus is placed on the needs of teachers and less on the differences between ELL learners, it may be possible to eliminate many of the ELL writing problems associated with teachers’ misguided actions.

Less serious consequences of teachers teaching poorly is evident in Zamel’s least skilled writer. Meaning took a back seat to grammar because grammar is what her teachers apparently thought about and cared about, at least according to Zamel’s least skilled writer. The most significant finding of our thesis originated from her teachers’ unnecessary focus on surface features and “thus made her unwilling to expend any
further effort (Zamel 181). As mentioned, her poor effort, her early surrender and her lack of metalanguage gave the impression that she, like Tony, was an ELL who lacked determination probably because she felt marginalized, although this is mere speculation based on the behaviors she displayed—we really do not have enough information to know for sure. But we can say for certain that in many cases, teachers have created a plethora of problems and challenges. The comments of teachers so often remain private affairs between a teacher and a student. Nevertheless, frequently the comments of teachers generate thought patterns leading to harmful ideologies, just as a tiny seed planted in the night grows into a tree—or thorn bush—for all to see.

Finally, teachers making excessive corrections give students the impression that accuracy is more important than ideas. As our thesis showed, many L2 students perceived that accuracy, not the expression of ideas or communication, was what teachers cared about. Perhaps this impression was made because of excessive corrections in red ink. Let me reiterate the finding so often repeated in this thesis, that an obsession with accuracy at the local level strangled ideas and shipwrecked global revising. An emphasis on form over content, a premature concern over accuracy, and too early of a focus on the presence of error all impede good composing practices because they cause writers to become fixated rather than mobilized. Our thesis clearly and repeatedly showed that a local focus too early does not reflect the composing processes of more skilled writers. It is imperative that L2 writers learn to discover and explore, particularly during the first phases of composing.

Teachers can do at least three things to help change the focus from accuracy to exploration. First, consider changing the context of the correction. Generally, the
context of the grammar lesson is the problem because the grammar lesson is in response to written errors made by students. Frequently, English teachers act like gym teachers drilling students in calisthenics. If writing is simple, something everyone can do, “uncomplicated by such factors as race, social class, and disciplinary conventions,” writing grammatically correct is a matter of practice, and practice a matter of diligence and discipline (Bushman and Ervin 138). Moreover, it is a matter of memorizing and following formulas that promises to improve writing if followed and practiced. Through this perspective, cognition is not as important as, say, word count or paragraph structure. The recursion model of composition, on the other hand, prompts teachers to consider cognitive factors while instructing L2 students: What are students thinking about during the process of composing? Our two struggling writers produced final drafts basically identical to their first drafts. Writing for them apparently did not generate ideas because they were concerned with the “look” of their writing (Perl, “Composing” 333).

To re-shift ELLs' focus, Williams advises teachers to do some shifting of their own: “Shift . . . attention from error treated strictly as an isolated item on a page, to error perceived as a flawed verbal transaction between a writer and a reader” (Bushman and Ervin 141). Another way to help is for teachers to let the writers know what it is that they as writers are saying—that is, to let them know “what is in fact communicated” (Zamel 182). This proved helpful in Chandrasegaran’s study. But these interventions may not take into consideration the complexities associated with some L2 learners, who may have trouble seeing beyond their own experience, as Perl’s Tony seemed to do. It is not so much a problem with what is communicated as with the reason it is communicated and how it is contextualized.
Second, to persuade students from holding a premature local focus teachers could encourage the reader to try to identify closely with the literary characters in the text, for “it can serve to move a reader beyond the maze of individualism and towards recognitions of problems in common with other workers” (Coles and Wall 303). Hynds maintains that the teacher should “bring personal understandings to literature” (58). But some resistance to getting ELLs to see the point of view of others—even characters on a page—should be anticipated. As Perl notes, readers unable to expand their focus beyond spelling and grammar errors are egocentric (“Composing” 332). Coles and Wall maintain that there is “difficulty moving from personal and anecdotal written responses to those that offer more abstract and general analyses” (303). Perhaps the ultimate answer is to train students to self-correct errors, which Chandrasegaran showed to be possible. In sum, many L2 learners tend to focus entirely on local textual aspects, in part because of the actions of composition teachers. To stem this tendency of L2 students, teachers should consider limiting grammar-error repair to contexts involving audience, literary characters in the text, and personal reflections, yet many L2 learners may have difficulty perceiving writing in these ways because of their “linguistically isolated” households (Suarez 29).

Teachers can also improve L2 writing behavior by simply accepting the beauty and innocence of ignorance rather than always trying to find an explanation for everything, which sometimes can lead to unnecessary demarcations between teacher and pupil. Zamel’s least skilled writer assumed that teachers cared mostly about local features, while Perl’s Tony “did not see the necessity of making . . . referents explicit, of making the connections among . . . ideas apparent” (Perl, “Composing” 332). Making
assumptions requires little energy, does not require feedback, and suggests laziness. But in the case of these writers, I would like to suggest that laziness is not the reason for the assumptions. When someone in a social setting does not help find a chair for a disabled person who walks into a room, she is not necessarily making the assumption that a chair is not wanted or needed, and she is not necessarily being lazy; rather, she may simply not know what to do.

A similar situation may exist for both our struggling writers—they may simply not know what to do. In other words, they are making a passive mistake, not an active one. By marking up the student's paper and assigning poor grades, an assumption of intent on the part of the student is implied. Haswell points out that in doling out poor scores, teachers may be obscuring the positive behaviors of students. Haswell asks, “When we notice one lack [mistake or shortcoming], do we sometimes create another, deficiencies hiding proficiencies? Does the very act of seeing an object as complex as writing require categorizations which belie that very complexity?” (314). In other words, the poor grades, that is, the identification of a "problem," may over-simplify what is happening within the students' processes. Perhaps rather than accuse these struggling writers of making assumptions, it might be better to simply recognize that these writers are doing the best they can, and leave it at that.

How L2 writers elicit all kinds of conjectures from teachers and researchers reminds me of a boss who had been raised in Tijuana, Mexico, until he was about thirteen, but lived in California ever since. He confessed to me that he did not know what starch was after I mentioned that starch helps when ironing. I was flabbergasted because I thought everyone knew what starch was. To be astonished or amazed by one’s lack of
knowledge or unorthodox behavior is natural, but in most cases no further action is warranted. There are many things known to people, and many things not known. My astonishment about my boss’s lack of knowledge about starch may parallel how many composition teachers react to the writing practices of challenged students. The point is that not knowing about something should not be managed in the same way as knowing something incorrectly.

Beyond all these suggestions for ELL teachers, suggestions that are not meant to ignore or dismiss the effective strategies teachers employ in the ELL classroom everyday, one must not forget that reading in one’s youth is a very important factor in developing writing skills in any language one attempts. Sandra Stotsky writes, “I found that at all educational levels, reading ability and reading experience were consistently correlated with writing achievement” (5). In addition, what one reads may help improve expository writing abilities:

Students might benefit enormously in learning how to write well-organized and effective essays or reports if they were regularly exposed throughout the upper elementary and secondary grades, to well-written, well-developed essays. (Stotsky 6)

Reading, then, should always be included in any L2 writing program. Early reading in both L1 and L2 mitigates many of the problems our strategies target—in other words, it is good preventative maintenance. Richard Rodriquez in elementary school read many books and claims that by high school he had read hundreds of books (67). He writes, “My habit of reading made me a confident speaker and writer of English. Reading also
enabled me to sense something of the shape, the major concerns of Western thought” (68).

As I have mentioned, I am very different from Richard Rodriquez; in particular, I did not read as voraciously as he. In fact, my home had very few books. I remember finding a rare book at home and reading it like a picture book, focusing and meditating on each word. The book was the autobiography of a surgeon, and I remember thinking that I could be a surgeon. Unfortunately, I do not remember reading many books other than the Bible until I was much older. Rodriquez wrote *Hunger of Memory* as a memorial to the Spanish of his childhood and to the loss of the intimacy he experienced once he became fluent in English. If I were to write about childhood loss, I could only write about the loss of my identity as a gringo surfer from southern California, a loss imposed upon me by a growing sense of foreignness.

Many ELLs are not improving their L2 skills. In fact, in 2005 eighteen percent of pre-k to 5th grade students was third generation Limited English Proficient (LEP) while twenty-nine percent of 6th grade through high school students was LEP (Suarez 28). This suggests that the school system is failing even young ELLs, a system that classifies over ten percent of its population as ELLs (Surarez 27). Since the odds are against many ELLs, it is important for ELLs to develop composing strategies. They include rereading, repeating words and phrases aloud, and writing with dogged determination. In addition to these steps, L2 writers can improve their writing by thinking about content above form, at least in the beginning of the composing process. Also, L2 writers should look at revising as courting: cleaning up, organizing, tightening, and reflecting. And writers should employ plenty of cohesive devices to make sure ideas and sentences are connected.
and coherent. Finally, L2 writers should employ their friends and teachers to read their texts aloud, encouraging them to gently point out errors, but only after the L2 writers try and are unable to. These are all reasonable steps any L2 writer could employ.

Since Perl’s Tony represents the ELL who really tried but failed—at least in writing academically legible text acceptable to most English composition teachers—in closing, I would like to share the first draft of Tony’s essay, which is almost identical to his final draft. According to Perl, Tony was very concerned about grammar and spelling errors, so he dedicated much of his editing time accordingly. Yet, obviously his essay is full of local errors. Perl, with a tone hinting of bewilderment, writes, “Even with his concern for revision and for correctness, even with the enormous amount of time he invested in rereading and repetition, Tony concluded the composing process with unresolved stylistic and syntactic problems” (328):

All men can’t be consider equal in a America base on financial situation. Because their are men born in rich families that will never have to worry about any financial difficulties. And then theyre are another type of Americans that is born to a poor family and alway may have some kind of fina—difficulty. Espeicaly nowadays in New York city With the bugdit Crisis and all If he is able To get a job. But are now he lose the job just as easy as he got it. So wehn he loses his job he’ll have to try to get some fina—assistance. Then he’ll probley have even more fin—diffuicuty. So right here you can’t see that In Amerian, all men are not create equal in the fin—sense. (Perl, “Composing” 335)
Tony argues that people in America are not equal, at least from a financial point of view; some are rich who may always be rich, and some are poor who may always be poor. In light of the city budget crisis, even when a poor person gets a job and improves his life, he could end up worse because he could lose his job. Tony worked very hard on this essay, but the final draft appears to be very similar to his first draft, but with more errors.

Part of me relates so much to Tony’s struggling prose. While I attended a Catholic elementary and junior high school for five years, between fourth and eighth grade, my brother Leroy attended for only one year, eighth grade. He had much trouble academically, which suggests that Leroy had difficulties with his basic education. Leroy's difficulty with school is what differentiated him from all the rest of us—a brother, two sisters and me. Here is an excerpt from a poem he wrote in cursive, probably in elementary school, which I think demonstrates his linguistic shortcomings (Appendix B):

To a Mother that help
me every day of the
year.

Mothers Day Poem
Mothers are nice
Because they are make of
suger and spices.
From your
son, LeRoy H.
This Mother’s Day poem contains a number of errors, including the substitution of *that* for *who*; *help* does not agree with *Mother* in number; *Because* should not be capitalized; *made* is spelled *make*; and *suger* is spelled incorrectly. I wonder whether all of these mistakes are related to my brother’s over-reliance upon my mother’s pronunciations of English, which seems to be the way in which most youngsters figure out how to spell, by sound—certainly not in the same way older children gain competence in spelling through reading. Perhaps back then my mother routinely pronounced *made* as *make* and did not clearly pronounce her *s’s* as many ELLs do.

Leroy, having been the first born among my siblings, may have been the most confused by my mother’s native language, for he was most likely the most exposed to it. While I can distance myself from the grammatical noise both Leroy’s poem and Tony’s essay generate because I can write without flagrant errors and gaping misspellings, I cannot distance myself from the sense of love Leroy obviously is expressing and from the sense of frustration Tony is revealing. The final sentence of Tony’s essay is a plea for the reader to understand, even though Tony senses problems in the text: “So right here you can’t see that In Amerian, all men are not create equal in the fin—sense.” When Tony says, “right here,” what is he referring to? It seems to me that he is referring to his heart, not to the writing on the page.

Somewhere in Leroy and Tony’s mind there is a place that everything they think and everything they want to share with others is clear as a blue sky in October, but when they try to put it in writing, the message becomes confusing and littered with grammatical errors. This is the case for Zamel’s least skilled writer as well, and I suppose for all ineffective writers. To help troubled writers make clearer connections between what they
have in mind and what they write, teachers should (if they do not already, that is) try looking at each writer with the same kind of respect one has for a great artist’s mind, because what Tony wants to say—and what most writers want to say—is quite serious and rhetorically beautiful, as Haswell seems to find in the writing of his bottom writers. Many are envious of poets, painters or sculptors, for to express ideas through art, such as painting, seems a wonderful gift to many. Mary Oliver believes that poets are born and not made: “Something that is essential can’t be taught; it can only be given, or earned, or formulated in a manner too mysterious to be picked apart and redesigned for the next person” (1). Looking at ineffective writers in this way might help concerned teachers better understand that Tony’s place is beautiful and meaningful, that “everybody is talented, original and has something important to say,” as Brenda Ueland contends (3). But we cannot stop here. That is, we cannot simply agree that what underlies the student’s confusing prose or verse is a place of coherence, however deeply embedded in that student’s subconscious. No, we must start—not stop—right here at Tony’s place, so that interventions are fueled by respect and awe, even in instances of ignorance (3).
APPENDIX A

ROBERT’S JUNIOR HIGH PAPER
Robert

Book Report

I. Title: *Judd*

II. Author: Raymond

III. Summary

Judd Harrow is a spoiled weak city kid, so his father tells him. To correct this, his father transports Judd’s mother and Judd to a small farm on the Rocky Mountains near where he grew up. Judd thought it was kidnapping since his father didn’t ask his opinion.

Judd dislikes the idea of country living even less when he learns that there will be no television, that he had to chop the firewood and gather it (why father decided against electric heating) and that he would be taking care of the cows and the other livestock his father intended to buy so that they could see the importance of being self-sufficient.

Judd’s opinion of his father, which was never very high, now lowered. Judd went against his dad, just like his democratic way.

Once on the farm, however, Judd begins to like living there, with his few friends and pets.

During the story, the characters reinforce the world is changing.

I recommend this book. It is
very good.

III Characterization:

Jude: A weak, city boy.
Talks back to father.
Father: Strong-minded, big
man. Stick to his opinion.
Mother: Typical mother.

Best part was when Jude's father
made him go to farm. It was
written good.
APPENDIX B

leroY’S POEM
To a Mother who help me every day of the year.

Mothers Day Poem

Mothers are nice

Because they are made of sugar and spices.

From Youth

Son, Le Roy Jr.
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WORKS CITED


