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WHEN WRITING BECOMES NIGHTMARE: HELPING STUDENTS PINPOINT WRITING TOPICS

Carla Capelo

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A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Art

in

Education:

Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages

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by

Carla Capelo

March 2018

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ABSTRACT

When deciding on topics for academic research papers, many students face difficulties that vary from choosing themes whose scope is too extensive to be satisfactorily analyzed in the given task, to selecting topics that are too limited, to not being able to make a decision on a topic at all. Such struggles seem to manifest themselves in both native and non-native speakers of English. Despite extensive research on the writing process and its strategies, be it for academic writing or other genres, and even research focused on writers' difficulties, previous research has found little about the troubles students must overcome when deciding on a research topic, and how to overcome them.

This study employed a qualitative case study design with two graduate students in a master's program in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, who were enrolled in two sections of a course on research, to investigate these students' writing processes as they defined a topic for their literature review research paper. Through an in-depth analysis of samples of their writing in combination with their verbal reports, collected during individual semi-structured interviews, this case study examined how two graduate students successfully calibrated their topics, which strategies they employed to that end, and how their instructors' actions helped them in the process. Consequently, the findings shed light on instructional practices, and their implications for teachers' training programs.

DEDICATION

Special and heartfelt thanks to my lifelong friend Patricia and family for embracing me as one of their own during my sojourn in San Bernardino. Patinha: None of my accomplishments at CSUSB would have been possible without your family's support. No words can ever express my gratitude for your kindness. Thanks to all my friends, near and far, whose support and encouragement kept me going, when I thought lacked the strength to persist. I carry you in my heart, and thanks to social media also on my phone, wherever I go.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The role played by English language in the Brazilian job market has increased exponentially over the past decades since the country achieved economic stability in the late 1990s. In 2001, Jim O'Neill, chairman of Goldman Sachs Asset Management, coined the acronym BRIC referring to Brazil, Russia, India, and China. O'Neill (2001) predicted that these countries would become pivotal players in the growth of global GDP in the following 10 years. Fueled by optimistic statements such as O'Neill's, and the recently consolidated democratic regime that provided economic stability, the Brazilian market started receiving unprecedented international attention associated with foreign investments. Attracted by inexpensive costs of labor, equipment, and real estate, multinational companies began planning long-term partnerships with Brazilian counterparts, or groundbreaking ceremonies for their own corporate offices. One consequence of this promising scenario was that English speakers became a hot commodity. Aiming to maintain their relatively low costs of labor, multinational and national corporations did not wish to hire native speakers of English, which led them to search for fluent speakers of English among Brazilian workers.

Such skilled professionals proved to be a rare commodity, as most candidates had stagnated between the basic and intermediate levels of

proficiency in English. Research conducted in Brazil by the British Council in 2013 showed that only 16% of the English speakers interviewed had advanced knowledge of English, whereas 32% were placed as intermediate speakers and 47% as basic ones. On the other hand, the same research stated that 91% of international businessmen operating in the Brazilian market considered the use of English language essential for the successful conduct of business. Considering the circumstances, the stage was set for English teaching institutions to thrive. Thrive they did, with more than 15,000 English as a Second Language (ESL)/English as a Foreign Language (EFL) academies established around the country, not including in these numbers the instruction of English language offered in public and private schools, or online programs.

Despite being able to choose from such a wide network of EFL institutions, Brazilians do not excel in their acquisition of English language skills. In 2015, EF Education First, an international group of EFL schools, conducted interviews with 910,000 people in 70 countries gauging their knowledge of English grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. The resulting ranking of English proficiency put Brazil in 41st place among those 70 countries surveyed. A perplexing question arises from this data: Why do so many Brazilian speakers of English perform below standards, notwithstanding the large number of learning opportunities at their disposal? Part of the answer to this question may be found in social and historical issues dating back to the inception of the Brazilian educational system, which would lead to discussions much too broad for the

scope of this paper, albeit certainly engaging. Suffice it to say that relevant to this case study is the assumption that a significant portion of the blame for the shortcomings of Brazilian learners of English can be assigned to deficiencies in the training of Brazilian English teachers.

Without a doubt, the sudden increase in demand for English speakers in the expanding Brazilian job market, as previously described in this section, influenced a noteworthy shift in the teaching of English, with subsequent expansion of EFL academies catering to students at all levels of proficiency and from all age groups, leading to the adoption of a wide variety of teaching methods. Furthermore, Brazilian legislation demands teachers possess a bachelor's degree in the subject they intend to teach in any grade of statutory formal education, which comprises pre-school through high school (Brazilian Ministry of Education, 2017). In other words, EFL teachers wishing to teach in Brazilian regular schools must attend undergraduate programs of English at the college level. According to the British Council (2014), such programs were offered by 495 universities and colleges around the country. However, considering the numbers related to the performance of Brazilian speakers of English cited in this section, one might infer that these English programs would benefit from the findings of research conducted about the difficulties that students of English face. More importantly, it is safe to assume that an in-depth analysis of writing strategies employed by successful writers of English would advance the training of future EFL teachers.

As a teacher of EFL in Brazil for over twenty years, I have witnessed students struggle to translate their ideas to the written language on many distinct occasions. Regardless of their fluency in the second language, students would face difficulties to articulate the images in their heads into sentences in a text at one point or another. Moreover, some students asserted that they experienced similar situations when writing in their native language, Portuguese. Observing classmates in my graduate classes in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, as well as foreign students in the university's Intensive English Program in California, highlighted the fact that those struggles seemed to beset writers of distinct languages as well as students at different levels of English language acquisition, which sparked my curiosity to investigate the matter of how graduate students pinpoint their topics for academic papers.

Purpose Statement

Despite extensive research on the writing process and its strategies, be it for academic writing or other genres, and even research focused on writers' difficulties, little has been found about the difficulties students must overcome when deciding on a research topic. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to investigate the processes through which two graduate students successfully calibrated their topics for a literature review paper. By means of the analysis of the difficulties they encountered, the writing strategies they employed, and the interactions they sustained with instructors, tutors and peers, I aimed to identity contributing elements to these students' success which could be utilized by other

writers. Lastly, I hope the findings of this case study might inform future training programs for teachers of English to speakers of other languages.

Research Questions

Intending to analyze the writing process of graduate students who had successfully calibrated their research topics for a literature review paper, I identified research questions that would allow me to uncover components of their writing process, which could be transferrable to other writers of English facing similar difficulties. Such questions focused on the difficulties the students overcame, the process they underwent to broaden or narrow their topics, the writing strategies they employed, and the interactions they sustained with professors, tutors, or peers:

RQ 1: What difficulties must students overcome when deciding on a topic

for a research paper? Follow-up questions:

i)   What do students perceive as the reasons for these

difficulties?

ii)   What are the types of difficulties that arise?

iii)   Are any of the difficulties that were faced by the students

specifically related to their status as a non-native speaker

versus a native speaker of English?

RQ 2: How do students broaden or narrow their topics for a research

paper? Follow-up questions:

i)   What is the process they take in order to do so?

ii) What changes do their ideas undergo as they broaden or narrow their themes?

iii) What causes these changes in their ideas?

RQ 3: How do writing strategies influence students' outcome? Follow-up questions:

i) What strategies did successful students employ to overcome such difficulties?

ii) What pitfalls did the not-so-successful students exhibit?

RQ 4: What kinds of interactions with the instructor, tutors and/or fellow students were involved? Follow-up questions:

i) What role did instructional practices play in helping pinpoint a topic?

ii) Which instructional practices did students perceive as most effective?

By participating in individual semi-structured interviews designed to investigate these questions, the graduate students would walk me through each step of their writing and thinking processes. I anticipated that such a journey would unveil discoveries for both this investigator and the research participants, which would offer relevant and significant information for teachers' practices and the design of future teacher-training programs, both in Brazil and in any country where English is taught to speakers of other languages.

Significance of the Study

The previously mentioned expansion in number of EFL academies in Brazil has generated a counterpart demand for professors and consequent need to prepare future teachers of English at the college level. Taking into consideration the large number of English programs offered by Brazilian universities, and the low performance of Brazilian speakers of English, it is safe to assume there is a considerable population of English teachers, who lack systematic instruction of methodologies and/or strategies for teaching English to speakers of other languages. As an aspiring instructor at the college level, I hope the findings in this in-depth case study might help me offer my future students useful insights into writing strategies that two successful Master's program candidates employed as they pinpointed their topics for a literature review paper. Lastly, I believe the writing processes analyzed in this case study may also offer significant contributions to a larger audience than that of Brazilian teachers of EFL because they might shed light on elements of the writing process that could be transferable to other writers as well as contribute useful insights to future ESL/EFL teacher-training programs.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews research that has been conducted on metacognition and its role in the self-regulation of one's writing process with emphasis on the difficulties faced by writers of different ages and different levels of proficiency. Examples of hurdles writers overcome, factors that hinder the writing process, elements that facilitate writing, strategies that successful writers employ, and instructional practices that foster improvement in quality of texts have been identified. However, no research on the reasons why college students face difficulties when pinpointing topics for academic papers has been found. Moreover, little has been researched about the strategies that successful college students utilize when calibrating their topics for academic writing.

Metacognition and the Writing Process

Analyzing the literature about metacognition, David Perkins emerges as one of the seminal researchers studying the thinking process in general, and its implications for the field of education, in particular. Together with Paul Kolers, Israel Scheffler, Barbara Leondar, and Howard Gardner, Perkins co-founded Project Zero at Harvard Graduate School of Education in the late 1960s (Project Zero, History section, n. d.) and has been studying the thinking process and its relevance to instructional practices over the last five decades. It comes as no surprise that many of the articles about the role of metacognition in the writing

process reviewed in this paper cite Perkins' findings and suggestions. This section introduces his ideas about the importance of being aware of one's thinking process as well as how other authors have applied Perkins's concept to their research on the writing process.

<u>Thinking Routines</u>

In "Making Thinking Visible", an article published in 2003, Perkins discusses the importance of making thinking processes visible in the classroom beginning in early childhood in order to avoid some of the pitfalls he found in his decades-long research; namely, the fact that most people do not notice when opportunities for thinking present themselves in situations as mundane as planning the best timeframe for a class project, or discerning facts from falsehoods in a politician's discourse.

Perkins (2003) explains that thinking routines are uncomplicated and require no special preparation on the part of the instructor. Simple questions prompting students to explain their viewpoints on any given subject should suffice. Moreover, he claims that teachers should be role models for the use of language that describes thinking processes. For example, clearly labeling as "hypotheses" the interpretations their students utter during a class discussion. Perkins also states that such behavior on the part of the instructors fosters a "culture of thinking" in their praxis, which "works very well across a range of subjects and draws rich responses from young children through graduate students" (p. 2). He concludes the article exhorting educators to engage their

students in thinking routines in the classroom because that will lead them to make meaningful connections between school content and their own lives. He alludes to the fact that most people are not aware of their own thinking processes because of their intrinsic invisible nature, but he also reminds educators that their "first task is perhaps to see the absence, to hear the silence, to notice what is not there" (p. 3).

Writing Process Awareness

While Perkins highlights the importance of awareness of one's own thinking process, many authors have explored other aspects of metacognition and their fundamental roles in the writing process, including consciousness of one's audience (Camp, 2012; Dix, 2006; Green & Sutton 2003); self-editing (Dix, 2006) and awareness of one's own writing process (Barrett & Hussey, 2015; Beauvais, Olive & Passerault, 2011; Corden, 2003; Dix, 2006; Jacobs 2004; Sitko, 1998), among others. Findings pertaining to audience awareness and self-editing will be discussed in more length in the third section of this literature review, which is dedicated to writing strategies. Relevant to this section is the awareness of one's own writing process.

Self-awareness about one's writing process has been the focus of innumerous studies. In the introduction to her article "Knowing How to Write: Metacognition and Writing Instruction", Sitko (1998) comments on research previously done about metacognition and the writing process, and highlights the importance of self-reflection, self-monitoring, and self-control throughout different

phases of one's writing process. Moreover, she concludes her paper stating that metacognition might facilitate students' progress in their academic lives as more complex writing tasks require the use of more sophisticated writing strategies. She affirms, "Student writers who become knowledgeable about their own cognitions will be able to employ them for a variety of contextual and rhetorical purposes" (p. 113).

Research conducted by Corden (2003) with 338 children, between the ages of 7 and 11, in an elementary school in the United Kingdom during one school year found evidence of growth in awareness of both audience and one's writing processes. Comparing texts students produced in January 2000 to other narratives they wrote in July 2001, the researcher sought to find examples in the students' compositions that evidenced they had made choices deliberately. Later, during individual interviews, he questioned the students about those choices attempting to verify if they could justify them. He found many examples of conscious and justifiable choices made by the student writers, which could be linked to improvement in the quality of their texts.

Jacobs (2004) also investigated young learners during a school year. She conducted a qualitative study with 16 kindergarten students in South Dakota, collecting data through observation, think-aloud techniques, interviews, and samples from students' work. She argues the students developed their writing and thinking processes and indicates that such evidence of achievement resides in the fact that the subjects started the school year employing drawings to

express their ideas, later conveyed thoughts through words they copied from mentor texts and, by the end of the year, they constructed simple sentences on their own. Lastly, she cites David Perkins's research on the thinking process and states that metacognition influences the production of written texts in a positive way, becoming a pivotal tool to fluent writing, which should be fostered in students from as early as kindergarten.

Researching students at the college level, Beauvais, Olive and Passerault (2011) conducted a study to analyze the relationship between quality of one's text and awareness of one's writing process. To that end, they monitored 24 psychology students as they applied think-aloud techniques during the composition of their texts. The researchers also timed the participants' reactions to auditory probes associating each probe with one specific segment of the think-aloud protocol to establish participants' cognitive efforts. To sum up, "participants had to perform three tasks concurrently: writing, reacting to auditory probes, and verbalizing their thoughts" (p. 417). The authors conclude that fluent writers know how to modify writing strategies according to the task at hand, evidencing their self-awareness of weak and strong points in their writing processes.

In their article "Overcoming Problems in Doctoral Writing Through the Use of Visualisations", Barrett and Hussey (2015) mention David Perkins and his findings about the thinking process as they describe their own experiences during the composition phase of their doctoral thesis. They applied Perkins's "making thinking visible" concept quite literally by drawing pictures, taking

photographs, and creating graphic organizers to facilitate the analysis of the data collected during their research. Moreover, they utilized such images to organize sections of their thesis as well as to practice for the defense of their theses, thus developing a model that might be useful to other doctoral candidates.

Some of the researchers mentioned in this section, as well as others, unearthed difficulties writers face when translating their thoughts into words on paper, or on a screen as sometimes the case might be, as they scrutinized the role of metacognition in the writing process. The next section in this review of the literature discusses such findings in more detail.

Difficulties Writers Encounter

Perusing the literature about research on writing, it seems that multiple factors play decisive roles as possible hurdles in one's writing process, such as negative emotions, misconceptions about writing processes, and writers' negative perceptions about their writing skills, all of which constitute important hindrances in the writing process, since they stop the flow connecting ideas to words on paper (Corden, 2003; Green & Sutton, 2003; Honeycutt, 2003; Singagliese, 2013; Udin & Ahmed 2014).

Employing a mix of focus group discussions, writing samples, interviews and questionnaires, Singagliese (2013) studied how the adoption of writing workshops impacted the quality of 91 students' texts in a private school in the state of New Jersey. Udin and Ahmed (2014) reviewed the literature about writing strategies in second language for their article "Do Not Just Tell, Paint an

Image: The Art of Descriptive Writing for Beginners". Both Singagliese (2013) and Udin and Ahmed (2014) claim that when students experience negative emotions toward writing assignments, their production displays low quality. Green and Sutton (2003) conducted qualitative research with 8 eleven-year-old students in the United Kingdom analyzing the factors that influence the young writers as they thought about and planned their texts. Among other findings, the researchers report that unfamiliarity with writing genres and excess of ideas affected the participants in an unfavorable way resulting in negative emotions and less automatization of the writing process.

However, more astounding results were found by Corden (2003) when he conducted his research in the United Kingdom with a group of 338 students ranging 7-11 years of age for the duration of a school year. Initial interviews detected alarmingly high levels of anxiety among the young subjects of that research with some of the children reporting that they felt physically sick or mentally tortured whenever they were given a writing assignment, which resulted in their inability to produce texts with quality or even write at all. Nevertheless, after one year of structured writing workshops and direct instruction of writing strategies, the researcher states that, in the exit interviews, the students indicated that their levels of anxiety and confusion had dropped considerably, substituted by confidence and self-esteem.

For his doctoral thesis, Honeycutt (2003) conducted a qualitative study in North Carolina to investigate why 11 fifth grade students failed the state writing

standardized tests at the end of the fourth grade, even though they were considered good readers because they had passed the state end-of-grade standardized tests on reading in the third and fourth grades. Utilizing in-depth interviews with each student and discussions in focus groups, Honeycutt compared transcripts from the interviews with his notes from meetings in the focus groups along with examples of writing from the students' portfolios as well as teachers' notes and lesson plans. Some of his findings indicate that in the beginning of the school year, before receiving direct instruction, students did not utilize strategies to self-edit their texts, possessed low self-confidence in their writing skills paired with strong negative emotions toward writing tasks.

During his research, Honeycutt detected a series of difficulties the students faced when having to compose texts: They were unable to choose by themselves any writing strategies that would help them complete their tasks; they were not able to retell stories in an organized way; they did not possess realistic expectations about their writing skills; they possessed negative self-image as writers; they did not understand the writing process correctly; they did not know the writing genre in which they should complete their tasks; they avoided writing tasks altogether; they employed negative words to describe their feelings toward writing tasks; they ascribed their fear of writing to past failures as writers; they became inactive as a result of their frustration; lastly, they demonstrated excessive concern with mechanics, grammar, and vocabulary not yet mastered, which prevented them from focusing on the composition of their texts. However,

after students attended structured workshops known as "Writing Academy five days a week (Monday – Friday) for 60 minutes each day, for 4 months" (p. 30), where they received direct instruction of writing strategies, the student writers demonstrated significant improvement in the quality of their writing.

While Singagliese's (2013) findings point at intrinsic factors, such as emotions, influencing writers' production, he affirms that extrinsic elements equally affect the writing process, of which instructional practices are a key componen. Similarly, Corden (2003) discovered that teachers' direct interventions designed to enhance children's self-confidence about their writing capabilities reversed alarmingly high levels of anxiety in the face of writing assignments. Green and Sutton (2003) describe intimate connections between children's self-confidence and their production of higher quality texts. Lastly, Honeycutt (2003) argues that internal motivation plays a strong role in writing outcomes, but difficulties in the writing process can be mitigated by structured practice of writing, and direct instruction on writing strategies. Considering the above-mentioned research findings, it would be reasonable to believe that writing strategies play a pivotal role in the success of one's writing process. The next section in this literature review analyses some of the research on writing strategies.

<p align="center">Strategies to Mitigate Difficulties in Writing</p>

Research on writing and thinking processes has informed and framed the study of writing strategies, as well as their application. If, on the one hand,

enhanced self-esteem and self-motivation contribute to improve writer's production (Corden, 2003; Green & Sutton, 2003; Honeycutt, 2003; Singagliese, 2013), on the other hand, research findings seem to confirm that direct instruction of writing strategies, and/or creation of more frequent opportunities for writing in and out of the classroom, will similarly result in higher quality of students' texts (Corden, 2003, Dix, 2006; Honeycutt, 2003; Green & Sutton, 2003; Jacobs, 2004; Slomp, 2012; Udin & Ahmed, 2014). Moreover, Barrett and Hussey (2015) argue that visualization might be a useful tool for doctoral students during the writing of their theses. Lastly, a wide range of writing strategies that cover all stages of the writing process have been analyzed by research, from self-editing, to applying graphic organizers to refining visual presentation aspects, be it in writer's workshops, tutoring sessions, regular classrooms, or writing centers (Corden, 2003; Dix, 2006; Honeycutt, 2003; Green & Sutton, 2003; Jacobs, 2004; Slomp, 2012; Udin & Ahmed, 2014).

Probably one of the most refreshing strategies is that suggested by Barrett and Hussey (2015). In their article about the use of visualizations as a tool for doctoral candidates to organize emerging ideas with creativity, they describe how they used images and graphic organizers to connect distinct parts of their research, and ultimately stimulate the writing of their own theses. Moreover, they state their personal experiences with the use of visual aids in the composing phase of their texts can be replicated by other researchers, ultimately helping doctoral candidates cement their novel additions to their fields of study. Barrett

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and Hussey (2015) argue that organizing information pertaining to a project through visuals may provide a researcher with the necessary distance to better understand the different ramifications the research has taken, or make better sense of abstract concepts, which is fundamental to being able to create innovative theories. The authors draw upon their own experiences as writers of doctoral theses and conclude their article affirming that visualizations helped them connect "analysis and creativity, logic and passion, accuracy of detailing the small picture and clarity of a holistic view of the bigger picture, mastery of textual language and original visual expression" (p. 60).

In her article "What Did I Change and Why Did I Do it? Young Writers' Revision Practices", Dix (2006) summarizes the findings of a qualitative research she conducted in New Zealand focusing on revision practices of 9 students (aged 8-10 years), who were considered good writers according to school's assessment. Dix (2006) describes how writers apply revision techniques to improve their texts, including conscious changes that they decided to make because they were aware of specific features of the genre in which they were writing. She states her surprise at observing the young subjects of her research engaging in numerous revision practices during the publication phase of their texts. In their interviews, the students stated they worried about visual aspects of their product, such as images, graphics, and margins, which the researcher linked to an awareness of audience. Lastly, referencing national debates around the theme of young writers' ability to self-regulate their writing production, she

defends a need for direct instruction of writing strategies, including self-editing techniques, as a way to help writers improve the quality of their texts. In the same vein, Green and Sutton (2003), while researching the writing processes of 8 eleven-year-old students in the United Kingdom, noticed that their subjects mentioned audience as an important element that they considered when planning their writing in both persuasive and narrative genres. Moreover, when investigating why one of their subjects had difficulties with a particular prompt, the child told the researchers she did not know the editor of the magazine to whom she was supposed to address a letter, as stated in one of the writing prompts she had received.

Honeycutt (2003) theorizes that employing schemata related to some aspects of writing frees the writer's brain to concentrate on other elements of the composing process. Furthermore, he argues that fluent writers monitor their own writing processes through self-regulation, which results from "experimenting and internalizing their own schema strategies and self-regulation strategies for reading and interpreting the prompt, planning, drafting, and revising their own writing" (p. 86). He further states that those participants who lacked proper comprehension of the writing process, failing to apply prior knowledge when composing texts, probably never received direct instruction on writing strategies. Honeycutt's (2003) findings also supply evidence that once students master writing strategies they may transfer such knowledge to different contexts as well as create strategies of their own that fit better with whatever writing tasks they

must complete. In his concluding remarks, Honeycutt (2003) indicates that despite the difficulties presented by the participants in the beginning of the research, the students themselves attested to improvement in the quality of their writing production, a direct "benefit from an intensive remediation program – a writing workshop program combined with focused instruction" (p. 127).

Summary

As demonstrated in this chapter, extensive research has been conducted on: metacognition and its role in writers' awareness of writing processes; the distinct elements that affect writing production; the many hurdles writers face; and, the strategies that might help writers overcome such difficulties. However, despite extensive research on the diverse ways of helping improve students' writing processes, an in-depth discussion about calibrating topics for academic papers was not found. Other than identifying hardships writers face in their writing processes, little investigation has been done on why so many students, even the ones skilled in writing, experience difficulties when pinpointing their topics for academic papers. Finding this lacuna in the study of writing, I set forth to research the process through which successful graduate students select and calibrate their topics for a literature review paper as a necessary means to illuminate the issue and scaffold future training of teachers, so they might help their students when facing similar difficulties.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This qualitative case study analyzed samples of the writing production of two graduate students, as well as their verbal reports obtained in individual semi-structured interviews, seeking to better understand the students' perceptions of their writing process and strategies as they chose and developed their topics for a literature review in a course about Research in a Master's program in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, during the Winter 2017 and Spring 2017 quarters. One student was a native speaker of English, while the other was a native speaker of Spanish.

The aim was to investigate graduate students' processes of defining a topic for their research papers, the challenges writers face when calibrating a topic, how they broadened or narrowed their topics, the writing strategies that successful writers employed to overcome their difficulties, and lastly, to shed light on instructional practices that support students in pinpointing a topic for their academic papers. By virtue of the fact that both a native speaker of English and a non-native speaker of English were included in this study, the findings posed questions about paradigms that assume that speakers of other languages face more difficulties than native speakers, when writing in English.

Research Questions

Once the goals of the research had been established, I identified the following research questions to guide the semi-structured interviews:

RQ 1: What difficulties must students overcome when deciding on a topic for a research paper?

    i)   What do students perceive as the reasons for these difficulties?

    ii)   What are the types of difficulties that arise?

    iii)   Are any of the difficulties that were faced by the students specifically related to their status as a non-native speaker versus a native speaker of English?

RQ 2: How do students broaden or narrow their topics for a research paper?

    i)   What is the process they take in order to do so?

    ii)   What changes do their ideas undergo as they broaden or narrow their themes?

    iii)   What causes these changes in their ideas?

RQ 3: How do writing strategies influence students' outcome?

    i)   What strategies did successful students employ to overcome such difficulties?

    ii)   What pitfalls did the not-so-successful students exhibit?

RQ 4: What kinds of interactions with the instructor, tutors and/or fellow

students were involved?

      i)   What role did instructional practices play in helping pinpoint

a topic?

      ii)   Which instructional practices did students perceive as most

effective?

Research Design

Reflecting on the objectives of this research, namely to study the

perceptions of graduate students about their writing process while they calibrated

their topics for a literature review paper, and considering the open-ended nature

of the research questions, it became clear the most suitable research approach

would be that of a qualitative case study. As McKay (2006) states in her book

Researching Second Language Classrooms, both quantitative and qualitative

methods may equally contribute relevant data and findings to the study of

teaching and learning a second language. However, when the researcher seeks

a more in-depth analysis of a small number of subjects, the qualitative approach

becomes a better fit. Furthermore, she argues that the aim of qualitative research

often is to "understand what happens in one particular classroom or what the

experiences are of specific language learners and teachers" (p.14), which was

precisely the goal of this case study. Finally, aspects of the research, such as

seeking to determine specific difficulties students noticed, while they broadened

or narrowed their topics, or discovering exact writing strategies and instructional

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interventions they perceived as helpful, demanded a thorough analysis of samples of the participants' writing production as well as their verbal reports obtained through individual interviews, which also indicated the case study format would be more appropriate. Furthermore, McKay's states that researchers often choose case studies because "they believe contextual features are highly relevant to their research question … it gives attention to the many variables that might be a factor in answering the research question and thus, the researcher gathers evidence from multiple sources" (p. 17).

Noteworthy, and of particular interest to this research, are the questions that address how participants perceived certain aspects of their process of calibrating their topics, which constitute examples of symbolic interactions. According to Honeycutt (2003), symbolic interactions signify "human experience is mediated by interpretation" (p. 25), while "phenomenology is an attempt to understand the meaning that individuals ascribe to an event" (p. 25). In other words, the writing processes of the participants in this research possess only the meanings that the graduate students being studied attribute to them. It was essential to investigate their perceptions and their subjective interpretation of how they pinpointed their topics by applying the phenomenological framework to the analysis of data. Therefore, the choice was made to employ a case study approach to this research, through semi-structured interviews exploring the research questions, combined with in-depth analysis of samples from the students' writings.

Research Setting

California offers an extraordinary setting in which to conduct research about ESL, be it teaching or learning of it, with approximately 1.3 million English learners enrolled in its public schools in the 2016-2017 school year (CA Department of Education, 2017). In addition, the Institute of International Education, ranked California as receiving the largest number of foreign students in the U. S. Exactly 156,879 foreign students enrolled in universities and colleges in California in the 2016-2017 school year. For this particular study, a course in Research in TESOL at a university in Southern California was chosen. This course is a core component of the university's Master's program in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, which is geared toward English teachers of all nationalities seeking specialization in various target teaching levels. The Research in TESOL course aims at introducing students to aspects of the research in general, and the field of TESOL, in particular. Instructional activities pertaining to this course ranged from discussions about required readings to the construction of keyword lists to the composition of annotated bibliographies. Activities were designed to help students plan and execute their culminating paper: A literature review paper on a topic of their choosing. Thus, this case study focused on the process through which graduate students chose and calibrated their topics.

<u>Participants</u>

   With objectives, research questions, methodology, and setting defined, the next step was submitting a proposal to the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) including: the background of the research; the objectives of the study; the research questions; the design and methodology of the study; the description of participants and how they would be recruited; how data would be collected; how data would be analyzed; and, lastly, how the results and conclusions would be disseminated.

   As soon as the approval from the IRB was obtained, I proceeded to invite participants. The first pool of participants were graduate students from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds, in the course in Research in TESOL in Winter 2017. I contacted them through email inviting them to volunteer as participants in this study, including both male and female students who were native speakers and non-native speakers of English. The email message briefly explained the research study and its objective of investigating difficulties graduate students encounter when calibrating their topics for a research paper. Moreover, the reason I had chosen that set of potential participants was due to the fact that I had taken the same course, which allowed me the chance to observe that the process of choosing a topic for the paper had been a challenge for a significant number of students. As their fellow student, I had established personal relationships with them, which fostered their trust and feeling of ease at discussing their writing processes. As a teaching assistant for the instructor in

that course, I tutored several students on their writing for that paper. Although I received positive responses from many students volunteering to participate, with the exception of one, most of the students had not kept their notes and drafts, which rendered their contribution to this study impossible, since access to that kind of artifact was essential for the collection and analysis of data.

When it became apparent I could not rely on solely one participant from that course to conduct my research, I amended the study the IRB had approved to expand the population of potential participants; and submitted the new proposal to the IRB for approval. The board swiftly replied, and I extended the invitation to participate in this study to students enrolled in the online version of the course in Research in TESOL in the Spring 2017 quarter. Similar to what had happened in the first pool of prospect participants, out of the students who replied, only one had retained the data I needed. Furthermore, after brief exchanges of electronic messages with both candidates discussing their experiences during the course in Research in TESOL, I concluded that the two graduate students volunteering to participate in the study had been successful at broadening and narrowing their topics for their research papers. Moreover, as described in detail above, a smaller number of participants would give me a chance to conduct a more in-depth analysis of the processes through which they underwent when choosing their topics.

The students were provided with a consent form detailing the goals and design of the study, identifying the researchers, and requesting the students'

permission to record their interviews both in audio and in video devices. The participants signed their consent forms and returned them to me. Finally, to safeguard the privacy and the anonymity of the participants, the students chose the pseudonyms by which they wished to be cited in this study. The male student chose Keoni, while the female graduate student chose Camila.

Keoni was born in Maryland almost sixty years ago. When he was nine years old, his family moved to Hawaii, where he lived until he finished his undergraduate studies. He taught English as a foreign language in China for over seven years. Camila was born in Mexico, where she lived until her family immigrated to California around 20 years ago, when she was twelve years old. At the time of our interviews, Camila was teaching middle school and some of her students were long-term English learners.

Data Collection

In this qualitative case study, I investigated two graduate students who successfully refined their topics for a literature review in a research class. Collection of data, which included samples of students' writing and semi-structured interviews, lasted from July 10th, 2017 to October 19, 2017.

Documents

Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (1994) argue that documents, "provide the researcher with facts pertaining to the subject and give insight into the organization, its history, and its purposes" (as cited in Honeycutt, 2003, p. 43).

For this case study, collecting samples of the participants' writing became essential for a better understanding of their writing processes.

Camila supplied notes and samples of assignments she had composed during the course in Research in TESOL: 34 pages of classroom notes she kept during the quarter. Relevant to this study were:

- A word map, which resulted from an in-class brainstorming activity designed to outline aspects of her topic;

- Notes on her readings, as she selected her sources;

- A cluster diagram she created to identify themes from the sources, which were connected to her topic;

- A reading matrix cross-referencing the ideas related to her topic, which she found in her sources for the literature review paper;

- Summaries and notes about the articles she read to compose an annotated bibliography on her topic;

- Annotated bibliography listing the sources she chose to develop her topic.

Different from Camila, who took the face-to-face course, Keoni participated in the online version of the course in Research in TESOL with a different instructor, so he did not keep class notes. However, he emailed me relevant artifacts:

- A keyword map he composed when searching for sources to read on his topic, alongside the feedback he received from the instructor;

- Annotated bibliography;

- A transcript of the thread of messages he exchanged with the instructor, via the instructional software used for the course, detailing his process of creating a list of keywords to research literature about his topic;

- The final draft of the literature review, which he composed about his topic.

<u>Interviews</u>

As helpful as the documents were, the semi-structure individual interviews became the core source of data in this case study. According to McKay (2006) "verbal reports" done in retrospect represent "one of the few methods available for accessing the thought process of learners" (p. 17). For this research, both interviews were conducted through a computer software, which enables video recording. Camila's interview lasted 45 minutes, while Keoni's was 50 minutes long. The interview protocol had been designed with open-ended questions to allow participants to expand on their replies and explore in more depth the concepts involved in their processes of pinpointing their topics. With that in mind, I did not deviate from the research questions, except when a need for clarification of some aspect of the participant's response manifested itself. For instance, when Keoni mentioned that creating a keyword map had helped him narrow his topic, I asked him to elaborate on that concept, supplying further details about how he had developed the keyword map.

I began the interviews by asking the participants to talk about themselves, as well as their educational and professional backgrounds. After that brief introduction, I followed the research questions in the order they had been designed:

1) What difficulties did you overcome when deciding on a topic for your literature review paper?

2) Why do you think you had these specific difficulties?

3) (To Camila only) Were any of your difficulties related to your status as a non-native speaker of English?

4) How did you broaden or narrow your topic?

5) What specific actions or steps did you take to calibrate your topic?

6) What changes did your ideas undergo as you broaden or narrow your topic?

7) What caused these changes in your ideas?

8) What specific writing strategies did you employ to calibrate your topic?

9) What kinds of interactions with the instructor, tutors and/or fellow students were involved in overcoming your difficulties and refining your topic?

10) Which instructional practices, if any, were most effective in the process of defining your topic?

Lastly, I listened to the recordings of the interviews and transcribed the participants' responses verbatim to ensure that I would have at my disposal a trustworthy source of information to analyze.

Data Analysis

McKay (2006) states that researchers of qualitative case studies often summarize the data they collect into original and creative categories. Similarly, Honeycutt (2003) justifies his choices of coding the information from the interviews he conducted in the research for his doctoral thesis.

He declares the following:

> This researcher sought to generate and develop categories in order to produce delimited theories grounded in the data. Because phenomenological study assumes commonality of those human experiences that are similar, this researcher read across interviews, noting similarities and differences, and used pattern coding to identify themes. This approach balanced the analysis of samples of the students' writing. (p. 44)

In the same vein, as I analyzed the data from the transcripts, I recognized three main themes emerged, namely: Types of difficulties each participant perceived they faced; actions each participant took to broaden or narrow their topics; and writing strategies they indicated having employed during the process of calibrating and developing their topics.

Honeycutt (2003) describes the method by which he coded data in his research. He explains he "listened to the individual audiotapes and simultaneously reread the transcripts on multiple occasions to ensure that key points were not lost or erroneously interpreted. He coded the data and placed them into the construct categories" (p. 51). I followed the same pattern of listening to the recordings of the interviews with Camila and Keoni multiple times, while reading their transcripts. When certainty that no relevant aspects of their processes had been neglected prevailed, I sanctioned the three categories previously described. Finally, for ease of referencing the examples from each category during the next steps of my research, I highlighted each theme in a different color on the printout of the transcripts. I used yellow for the types of difficulties, pink for the process of broadening and narrowing the topics, and blue for the strategies.

Following McKay's (2006) idea that qualitative research "starts with the assumption that classroom learning must be studied holistically, taking into account a variety of factors in a specific classroom" (p. 6), I systematically compared the responses the participants gave me in the interviews to the documents they had supplied. I did so seeking evidence, in their writing samples, of what they had described in their verbal reports.

Limitations of the Study

As a teacher assistant and student in the same face-to-face course as Camila, I was given an opportunity to observe part of her process of pinpointing

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her topic, which affected my understanding of her responses to some of the interview questions. I did not have the same situation upon which to rely, when interviewing Keoni, who participated in the online course. However, the activities being similar and the culminating paper being identical for both versions of the course, I was able to understand his responses, and asked for clarification whenever I did not follow his descriptions.

When choosing to design a case study for this research, I was aware the number of participants would be small. However, if on the one hand a small sample might lack statistical reliability, on the other hand, the reduced number of participants allowed for more qualitative and in-depth analysis of the data, which led to a better understanding of nuances in the participants' processes of fine-tuning their topics for a research paper.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

By choosing to analyze these specific cases, the main goal of this study was to achieve a better understanding of how two graduate students calibrated their topics for a research paper. In doing so, the study intended to identify difficulties these students faced when broadening or narrowing their topics, successful strategies they employed in their process to select and develop their topics, and instructional practices their instructors offered that proved to be relevant when the students chose their topics. It is safe to state that the findings in the study addressed all the previously mentioned research questions, as further demonstrated in the next section.

Choosing a Topic for Writing

Even though Keoni and Camila experienced similar situations when choosing their topics for a literature review assignment in their Research class, they also underwent distinct hardships. Keoni and Camila began their process of choosing topics with themes in mind that they wished to investigate due to professional experiences they had while teaching English to speakers of other languages. Facilitated by their respective instructors, Keoni and Camila narrowed their topics to a manageable size and were able to develop them into their final papers. However, as described below, their processes differed.

Keoni taught English as a foreign language in China for over seven years, during which period he would sometimes question himself about the validity of parts of the materials offered to students, even though he enjoyed teaching those specific topics. He feared the issue that interested him the most – the importance of emphasizing prosodic elements, such as stress, intonation, and rhythm in ESL teaching - would not offer enough scholarly resources from which he could draw relevant information to develop his topic into a meaningful paper. Therefore, when it came time to discuss his topic with the instructor, Keoni told her he would like to research Listening Comprehension, which was broader than his original theme, but proved to be too broad of a topic.

In his interview, Keoni affirmed he was able to narrow his topic through a keyword mapping activity required by his instructor, where Keoni listed essential keywords connected to his topic, which he could use to search for sources in the literature. Keoni stated in his interview that he managed to do so because, when the instructor told him he needed to narrow his topic, he penned a description, as clearly and as concisely as he could, of what he wanted to unearth through his reading of the literature.

Keoni wrote to his instructor:

> The question that drives my interest in this topic is: Is there clear evidence from research (either qualitative or quantitative) that emphasizing prosodic elements in ESL teaching is worth the effort in terms of significantly improving SLA? And if so, what ways of

teaching it have proven most effective? So, my paper would not

focus much on describing these elements as they exist in English,

but on analyzing what the literature indicates about how worthy

they are to teach. (see Appendix A)

He explained that he wished for his paper to be relevant, so he distilled in

his mind how he could achieve that. He decided he wanted to investigate

whether studying prosody made a difference in students' development of

speaking skills or if that aspect was a peripheral item that should not be

emphasized. From that carefully crafted statement he sent to his instructor, she

was able to provide Keoni with a map of keywords that he used to search for

sources to write his paper (see Appendix B). His topic had been pinpointed

through a series of instructor interventions in which he was prompted to further

specify the scope of his topic, and then to elaborate the dimensions of that

narrowed topic

In Camila's case, working in a public school in California put her in contact

with long-term English learners on a daily basis. She was interested in searching

the literature for articles that focused on helpful strategies that she could later

teach the long-term English learners in her classes. Because the scope of the

literature review for Camila's class required a narrower theme than strategies,

after discussing possibilities with her instructor, and developing an annotated

bibliography (one of the mandatory assignments for that class), Camila decided

to research about writing strategies. In her interview, she affirmed that she was

aware that the fact she had immigrated to the United States at twelve years of age had influenced her choice of the topic of writing strategies for long-term English learners for her paper. As a young newcomer, she had faced innumerous challenges adapting to academic writing expectations, mostly unfamiliar to her, without proper direct instruction. With such a topic for her research paper, she aimed at uncovering writing strategies that she could teach her students.

As she composed the annotated bibliography, Camila kept an acute awareness of her audience:

> I read the articles to see what was out there. I would read the texts and would say this is too broad. If someone is reading this and I'm giving information about this, I'm sure they'll have more questions, so I had to narrow it down. I did go back and forth as far as choosing the topic. I would ask myself if someone is reading this paper, what questions they would still have. (Camila, interview, September 20, 2017)

Camila also mentioned that her instructor's suggestions helped her pinpoint her topic because she was facing difficulties finding enough articles, and therefore information, on which to base her paper. During interactions with her instructor, both in class and during office hours, Camila reported to the instructor her difficulty in finding sources about her topic, which at that point focused on strategies for long-term English learners. The professor suggested ways in which Camila could narrow the topic by changing the focus without changing the

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subject that she favored. After that instructional intervention, she realized she could research writing strategies, as opposed to strategies in general, for long-term English learners. Thus, Camila defined the topic for her paper for the research class through reflecting continuously on her audience in the process of her own prewriting activities, and through feedback from the instructor.

Developing The Topic

Once Keoni and Camila had decided which topics they would research in order to write the literature review for their class, they did not change their topics. However, the interviews revealed interesting aspects of the development of such topics into their final papers, alluding to the adoption of relevant writing strategies worth mentioning.

In his interview, Keoni described how his topic became "the lens through which he read the articles, the focus as he gleaned through the articles" (Keoni, interview, October 12, 2017) looking for examples to include in his paper. Furthermore, he disclosed that he employed a strategy that is habitual for him. After choosing the topic, he wrote the introduction to his paper, which contained the thesis statement. He did so with care and attention, polishing the text until it was good enough for a final draft (see Appendix C).

In his words:

> That first page sets the scope and focus of the paper. It becomes
>
> my home base as I venture out into the research. That informs and
>
> directs everything. Early on, I questioned myself if I was spending

too much time on that first page when I wasn't sure where the

research was going to go, but it works as a security blanket to

remind me I know where I'm going with the paper (Keoni, interview,

October 12, 2017).

He stated in the same interview that at one point in the process of writing

his paper he questioned his approach and wondered whether or not it was the

best way to conduct research. He thought that maybe he should have started

reading some of the articles before writing the first page of his paper. He told me

that had he done so, his readings would have informed his paper more.

However, he confessed that he did not like that approach, so he used his thesis

statement to guide the readings, a top-down approach to writing a research

paper because he started with what should have been the end result of his

research.

In Camila's case, it became quite apparent in her interview that she

possessed an acute awareness of her audience as she read the articles and as

she developed the topic into her final paper. Her need for structure when

researching and writing was so acute that she employed graphic organizers

before she started writing her paper. The annotated bibliography she prepared

while reading the articles proved to be invaluable when it came time to write her

paper because she would refer to the comments in the annotated bibliography to

remind herself of the contents of each article rather than going back to the actual

text. For instance, as she read the sources she had found, she composed

detailed notes about each article describing its research method, themes studied, relevant claims, and connections to other sources (see Appendix D). She also described, in the interview, how she sometimes changed sections of her paper, without changing her topic, depending on what she found in the articles that would better inform the paper, because she wished her audience to have access to the most relevant aspects of the topic she was researching.

Writing in her native language to get her ideas flowing before switching to English was another strategy Camila employed to develop her topic. When asked if that was a habit of hers she confirmed it was, mainly when writing introductions to her papers, which she considered to be her weakest point in the writing process in any genre. She attributed that difficulty to the fact that she never had direct instruction about different writing genres when she arrived in the American school system at twelve years of age. She claimed her teachers probably assumed she had learned the basic elements of each genre in previous years. She believes the instructors' assumption stemmed from the fact that those elements were taught in previous grades in the American school system. Nowadays, as an instructor of English learners, she makes a point of supplying her newcomer students with direct instruction about writing genres, when she notices they lack it.

As I investigated the samples of the participants' writings along their verbal reports, it became apparent how these findings connected to those results

found in previous research conducted in the field. Such connections are described in the next chapter.

Summary

Keoni and Camila started their process of finding a topic for their literature review papers with broad topics that were connected to their personal experiences as teachers and narrowed them by employing specific writing strategies directly instructed by their professors. Moreover, when Camila was 12 years old and an English learner, she struggled with aspects of different writing genres because she did not receive appropriate and direct instruction from her teachers.

When developing their topics, Keoni and Camila trod opposite paths. He applied a top-bottom approach to writing his paper by composing an introduction to his literature review and using it to guide his research and reading of the sources. Conversely, Camila's awareness of audience guided her reading of the sources she found as well as the composition of her literature review, a bottom-up approach to the task. Lastly, she relied on her native language, Spanish, to begin writing, whenever she faced difficulties expressing her ideas in English.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Both Keoni and Camila faced difficulties finding articles for their topics, and such difficulties influenced their choice to calibrate their themes, as described in detail in the previous chapter. While Keoni employed a top-down approach to developing his topic, writing his thesis statement before he began his research, Camila chose a bottom-up approach to developing her topic, which was made apparent by her awareness of her audience. Keoni and Camila cited instructional interventions that helped them and both applied writing strategies to broaden and narrow their topics. Although treading distinct paths, both graduate students successfully achieved their goals of choosing a topic and developing it into a literature review for their research classes. Finally, some of these findings may shed light on future teacher training.

Discussion

In light of the literature reviewed for this case study, the analysis of its results highlighted relevant topics for further discussion. The next sub-sections of this paper detail them in connection with research previously conducted.

Lack of Proper Instruction

As mentioned in Chapter 4, Camila linked her difficulty when writing introductions for academic papers directly to a lack of proper instruction on how to do that when she came to the United States at twelve years of age and started

going to school. I would argue that Camila's personal experience reinforces a need for training teachers to provide their students with direct instruction of writing strategies, which resonates in the literature. In his research, Corden (2003) interviewed the same students before and after one year of direct instruction of writing strategies to discover that the proper instruction helped them display self-confidence when describing their performance during writing tasks. He concludes that "with direction from teachers: Providing models, demonstrating and drawing attention to the features of texts, and through focused group discussion, it appears that children can develop their awareness of how texts are constructed" (p. 24). Similarly, Honeycutt (2003) argues that writing instructors should grant students the means to control their own writing. He went as far as to state that this would be achieved when teachers explicitly instructed students on how to use schemata pertaining to storytelling and strategies that would allow students to regulate their own writing processes. According to the data collected in his research, the combination of these two types of instruction enhanced the students' performance. Just as Camila cited her lack of proper instruction on different writing genres as the reason for her difficulties when writing introductions, Honeycutt (2003) in his research asserted that beginner writers should receive specific instruction on strategies to avoid a delay in developing writing fluency or never achieving it at all.

<u>Strategies</u>

As for strategies, the data I collected revealed those that two graduate students applied when choosing and developing their topics. Keoni and Camila continuously revised and self-edited their writing. In other instances, they employed distinct strategies according to the stage of their writing process. While Keoni employed mind maps to refine his ideas and search adequate sources, Camila catalogued the information obtained in the reading of her sources in graphic organizers before she started to develop the topic (see Appendix E). Moreover, such strategies were directly instructed by the professors in each course. When time came for Camila to write the introduction to her paper, a stage she was aware was her weakest, she faced it by composing the introduction in her native language until the ideas started to flow, then switched to English. In an opposite approach, Keoni developed and polished the introduction to his paper before he started reading the articles. He confessed he was not only aware that his thesis statement guided his readings, but also that he should have read his sources before writing the introduction to his paper. It seems to me that focusing on one's own pre-conceived ideas when reading the sources for research is a questionable method, but one to which a student researcher might fall prey. This is another example of the pressing need for instructional practices that might help prevent this kind of pitfall for student researchers. Teacher training plays a pivotal role in assuring that good practices are spread among instructors and writing strategies are taught.

Once again, such observations from this research echo the research found in the literature. In his doctoral thesis *Good Readers/Poor Writers: An Investigation of the Strategies, Understanding, and Meaning That Good Readers Who Are Poor Writers Ascribe to Writing Narrative Text On-Demand* Honeycutt (2003) noticed that students' performance improved considerably when instructors provided "direct, explicit instruction in self-regulation strategies. The data demonstrate that these students were readily able and eager to transfer the use of modeled strategies" (p. 82). Moreover, Honeycutt stated that such autonomy in students' use of writing strategies happened when they assumed control of their own processes, which would be a "result of experimenting and internalizing their own schema strategies and self-regulation strategies for reading and interpreting the prompt, planning, drafting, and revising their own writing" (p. 86).

While calibrating her topic, as well as during her reading and pre-writing organization of her ideas, Camila demonstrated acute awareness of her audience, which seems to be a consensus among different authors in the literature when they describe successful writers. Camp (2012) stated that college students keep their audience in mind during the process of writing because they want to send a clear message to the readers. Dix (2006) investigated young writers and their ability to revise their texts. In her article, based upon such research, she briefly described how the writers self-regulated the revisions during the pre-writing, writing, and final publication. At this last stage, the young authors

were concerned with visual aspects, such as images, graphics and margins, which the researcher attributed to the fact that the students were aware of their audience. In their concise article about their qualitative study applying think-aloud techniques to explore children's perception of the weaknesses and strengths in their writing processes, Green and Sutton (2003) discovered that children reiterated the importance of writing to an audience as they composed in both persuasive and narrative genres. The researchers cited the case where one of the students described difficulties when prompted to write to the editor of a magazine because the child did not know who the editor was. In his research with students in elementary school, Corden (2003) cited examples of children's production that evidenced progress in the quality of their writing due to the fact that they were more aware of their audience and writing processes.

Self-editing and revising are fundamental writing strategies. Both Camila and Keoni revised their writing at different stages of the process of pinpointing and developing their topics. Camila wrote in her native Spanish as a way to get her ideas flowing before switching to English because she was writing an introduction, which is a feature of academic writing with which she historically struggled. Likewise, she changed sections of the paper to accommodate the topic she wanted to explore. Keoni described how he penned an elaborate introduction and how he referred to that section of his paper whenever he felt lost during the reading of a given source. Dix (2006) describes changes that young writers made to their texts, and states that such changes evidence their

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awareness of audience because they had made changes to better fit certain features of the genre in which they were writing. She concludes that, regarding on the training of future teachers, "teachers must be aware of the complex, cognitive decision-making processes in making revision changes" (p.9).

The idea proposed by Barrett and Hussey (2015) that doctoral candidates should organize their ideas through visuals found a counterpart in the way Camila employed graphic organizers in the pre-writing stage of her process, when she created a reading matrix synthesizing her sources for an assignment the instructor had designed to directly instruct the students about this writing strategy (see Appendix E). Similarly, Keoni's use of a work map to create a list of keywords, following his professor's direct instruction, constitutes another example of a way to employ images to organize one's ideas. Barrett and Hussey (2015) state that manner of organization "communicated and framed the key concepts to be covered in the writing, highlighting the significance of certain elements and some similarities, differences and links between concepts" (p. 51-52).

In our conversations, it became clear to me that Keoni and Camila were aware not only of their writing processes, but also of their thinking. Keoni described with vivid details what went through his mind as he composed the introduction to his paper. Camila kept referencing her audience and describing how thoughts of the reader's interpretations of her text guided her pinpointing and developing the topic. Considering these two graduate students successfully

defined their topics and wrote their research papers, it seems safe to infer that their successes stemmed from their ability to plan and execute. It would also be a natural conclusion that future training of teachers should include attempts to make teachers aware of their own thinking processes in a way that they would become models for their students. Perkins (2003) exhorted teachers to create thinking routines in their classrooms and pointed out that one of the simplest ways for teachers to help their students develop their awareness was to become role models. He affirmed that "teachers who do not expect instant answers, who display their own honest uncertainties […] express respect for the process of thought and implicitly encourage students to notice problems and opportunities and think them through" (p. 1).

It seems to me that Keoni's and Camila's success in pinpointing their topics for their research classes touches on the importance of being aware of how writing processes unfold and being able to apply efficient strategies. Moreover, activities conducted by their instructors played fundamental roles in their ability to define their topics. These notions confirm the need to train future teachers in a way that equips them with the tools they need to guide their future students in their writing efforts. That should include direct instruction of writing strategies, distinct features of different writing genres, and awareness of one's writing processes.

Summary

Chapter One introduced a brief contextualization of the teaching of EFL in Brazil and its shortcomings. Combining my personal experience of over two decades teaching English in Brazil and the realization that current research had not adequately addressed the process students undergo when pinpointing their topics for academic papers, I sought to investigate this lacuna. Chapter Two reviewed the literature and listed findings connected with metacognition, hurdles writers face in their writing processes, and strategies successful writers employ to overcome difficulties. All of this, although relevant to the writing process as a whole, did not address the calibration of academic topics. Chapter Three described the methodology applied to this case study, its participants, setting, collection, and analysis of data. Employing research questions that focused on the difficulties that students overcome in their process of broadening and narrowing research topics for a literature review paper, as well as the writing strategies they used, and the role played by their instructors and peers, I analyzed the successful outcomes of two graduate students. Chapter Four presented the findings of this study describing how the participants pinpointed and developed their topics for a literature review paper. It would be expected that the results of the present study might be transferred to other writers of English as well as inform future teacher-training programs. Chapter Five associated the results of this case study with other findings from researchers in the field and indicated possible avenues to be pursued by future research on the topic.

Recommendations for Future Research

Despite the positive findings in this qualitative case study, they do not exhaust the process of calibrating one's topic for academic papers. If anything, these results suggest further research is necessary to examine this issue in more depth. It is my hope that future researchers investigating the reasons why students struggle when pinpointing their topics for academic writing might replicate this case study and expand its findings, which could unearth new revelations with further implications for teacher- training programs.

APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVALS

May 16, 2017

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Expedited Review
IRB# FY2017-152
Status: Approved

Ms. Carla Capelo and Prof. Kathryn Howard
Department of Teacher Education and Foundations
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Ms. Capelo and Prof. Howard:

Your application to use human subjects, titled, "When writing becomes nightmare: Helping students pinpoint writing topics," has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The informed consent document you submitted is the official version for your study and cannot be changed without prior IRB approval. A change in your informed consent (no matter how minor the change) requires resubmission of your protocol as amended using the IRB Cayuse system protocol change form. **Your application is approved for one year from May 16, 2017 through May 16, 2018. Please note the Cayuse IRB system will notify you when your protocol is up for renewal and ensure you file it before your protocol study end date.**

Your responsibilities as the researcher/investigator reporting to the IRB Committee include the following 4 requirements as mandated by the Code of Federal Regulations 45 CFR 46 listed below. Please note that the protocol change form and renewal form are located on the IRB website under the forms menu. Failure to notify the IRB of the above may result in disciplinary action. You are required to keep copies of the informed consent forms and data for at least three years. Please notify the IRB Research Compliance Officer for any of the following:

1) Submit a protocol change form if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your research protocol for review and approval of the IRB before implemented in your research,
2) If any unanticipated/adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research,
3) To apply for renewal and continuing review of your protocol one month prior to the protocols end date,
4) When your project has ended by emailing the IRB Research Compliance Officer.

The CSUSB IRB has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional approvals which may be required. If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the IRB Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application approval identification number (listed at the top) in all correspondence.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Caroline Vickers

June 05, 2017

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Protocol Change/Modification
IRB# FY2017-152
Status: Approved

Ms. Carla Capelo and Prof. Kathryn Howard
Department of Teacher Education and Foundations
California State University, San Bernardino
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Ms. Capelo and Prof. Howard:

The protocol change/modification to your application to use human subjects, titled, "When writing becomes nightmare: Helping students pinpoint writing topics," has been reviewed and approved by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB).

You are required to notify the IRB if any future substantive changes/modifications are made in your research prospectus/protocol, if any unanticipated adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research, and when your project has ended. If your project lasts longer than one year, you (the investigator/researcher) are required to notify the IRB by email or correspondence of *Notice of Project Ending* or *Request for Continuation* at the end of each year. Failure to notify the IRB of the above may result in disciplinary action. You are required to keep copies of the informed consent forms and data for at least three years.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application identification number (above) in all correspondence.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Caroline Vickers

Caroline Vickers, Ph.D, IRB Chair
CSUSB Institutional Review Board

CV/MG

APPENDIX B

KEONI'S EMAILS TO THE INSTRUCTOR

Created By ▓▓▓▓▓▓ on Thursday, April 13, 2017 4:57:04 PM PDT
last modified by ▓▓▓▓▓▓ on Thursday, April 20, 2017 9:15:28 AM PDT
Hi Dr. ▓▓,

I would like to focus my Literature Review on methods/techniques for improving listening comprehension in ESL/EFL settings.

The keywords ESL and "listening comprehension" netted a fair amount of articles (60), among which a quick examination yielded about 10+ articles that seemed to relate directly to my topic.

I realize this topic may be too broad - if you feel it is, I could narrow it to just one of the methods I encountered on this preliminary search - that of using captions/written texts concurrent with listening to enhance comprehension. (But saw only 4 articles after trying a few key word search strategies in our library.)

Thursday, April 13, 2017 10:08:43 PM PDT
Hi ▓▓,
Thank for for doing an initial search. I'm surprised that you only found 60 articles on this topic; I would think there would be thousands. It is quite broad. I do like the idea of restricting it to captioning to enhance comprehension. What do you think we could add to this to augment the number of articles on this search? Maybe if you add "speech-to-text" and "voice recognition"? However, this would be getting more into speaking than listening comprehension, if you're interested in that. (They do usually go hand-in-hand). It would be nice to bring this topic into the modern era and look at some of the technological advances that can improve listening comprehension.
▓▓▓▓▓▓ said…
Sunday, April 16, 2017 9:14:12 PM PDT
Hi Dr. ▓▓,
I have decided to change my research focus from listening comprehension to the use and value of emphasizing prosodic elements of English (stress, intonation and rhythm) in ESL teaching.
I used the following key word grouping which resulted in a good mix of articles to consider:

ESL and stress* or intonation or prosody*

Interestingly, when I added the words "or rhythm" to the above, it resulted in about half of the articles I got without it (including some that looked potentially very pertinent to my focus.) I would have thought adding another word with "or" would result in more, not less articles???

Also, on a more general note, do we need to restrict publication dates of articles/books reviewed to after a certain year (as in the TQ Research Evaluation)? As long as we refine our search under "peer reviewed" , can we chose "any" under "format" in the refine search section, or do we need to restrict our literature reviews to journal articles only? (e.g. no books or other publications that may be peer-reviewed).

██████████ said…
Tuesday, April 18, 2017 11:55:42 AM PDT

Hi ███,

You're on the right track and this is more interesting than just focusing on listening, which has already been done to death. However, we still need your key words to be a bit more specific. What is it exactly about "ESL and stress* or intonation or prosody" that you would like to investigate? Otherwise, this sounds like a suprasegmental phonetics textbook.

You do not need to restrict the date for this bibliographic research. For your lit review, it's good to have a variety of article publication dates--some classics (seminal texts) and some current articles that bring us up-to-date on the "current state of the art".

██████████ said…
Tuesday, April 18, 2017 12:22:16 PM PDT

Hi Dr. ███,

Thanks for your feedback -the question that drives my interest in this topic is: is there clear evidence from research (either qualitative or quantitative) that emphasizing prosodic elements in ESL teaching is worth the effort in terms of significantly improving SLA? And if so, what ways of teaching it have proven most effective? So, my paper would not focus much on describing these elements as they exist in English, but on analyzing what the literature indicates about how worthy they are to teach. You may feel this is still too broad – that maybe I need to focus on just one of the language skills in SLA? (speaking or listening); (actually, I see strong potential for teaching prosody in improving both speaking and listening and am interested in seeing what the literature says about how such teaching improves both skills.)

██████████ said…
Wednesday, April 19, 2017 6:09:23 AM PDT

Try this and see if you get a good response to your query:

ESL and stress* or intonation or prosody* to improve listening and speaking

██████████ said…
Wednesday, April 19, 2017 10:27:34 AM PDT

Hi Dr. ███,

Thanks for your suggestion; however, when I added "to improve listening and speaking", a significant number of promising-looking articles were excluded. Some examples are:
"Discourse Prosody and Teachers Stated Beliefs and Practices"
"Typology of Rhythm Reconsidered: An SLA Perspective"
"Pragmatics and Prosody in English Lang. Teaching"
"Pronouncing English: A Stress-based approach"

It appears for some reason that titles containing the word "Prosody" (the focal point of my interest) were largely excluded when adding the qualifying words.
I tried a couple of variations on these added words, but results were not good. Am I restricted to using only the key words we agree on, or can I "supplement" them with other key words that produce pertinent articles for review? (It does seem that the qualifying words you suggested produced some articles of interest that were NOT present with the key words minus those qualifying words.)

████████ said…

Thursday, April 20, 2017 9:15:07 AM PDT

Yes, you can certainly play around with the key words to get the best articles for your research. Let's leave what I said as your official key words, but feel free to manipulate them as you see fit.

approved

APPENDIX C

KEONI'S KEYWORD MAP

Support from Research

Support for the Importance of Prosody Instruction to Promote SLA

Channell, C. (1997). Raising the pedagogic status of discourse intonation teaching. ELT Journal, 51(3), 117.

Theoretical support

Lu, J., Wang, R., & Silva, L. (2012). Automatic stress exaggeration by prosody modification to assist language learners perceive sentence stress. International Journal of Speech Technology, 15(2), 87-98.

Current Methods

ESL and stress' or intonation or prosody' to improve listening and speaking

Field, J. (2005). Intelligibility and the Listener: The Role of Lexical Stress. TESOL Quarterly, 39(3), 399-423. doi:10.2307/3588487

Teaching Methods

Teaching Implications from Research

Baker, A. (2011). Discourse prosody and teachers' stated beliefs and practices. TESOL Journal, 2(3), 263-292.

Teaching Implications

Teacher/learner perceptions on the value of teaching prosody

Student Perceptions

Perspectives on future research needs

ESL and stress* or intonation or prosody* to improve listening and speaking

I.   Support for the Importance of Prosody Instruction to Promote SLA

A.   Theoretical support

1.   Clennell, C. (1997). Raising the pedagogic status of discourse intonation teaching. ELT Journal, 51(2), 117-125.

A.   Support from Research

I.   Perspectives on future research needs

I.   Teacher/learner perceptions on the value of teaching prosody

A.   Teacher's Perspectives

1.   Baker, A. (2011). Discourse prosody and teachers' stated beliefs and practices. TESOL Journal, 2(3), 263-292.

A.   Student's Perspectives

I.   Teaching Methods

A.   Current Methods

1.   Lu, J., Wang, R., & Silva, L. (2012). Automatic stress exaggeration by prosody to assist language learners perceive sentence stress. International of Speech Technology, 15(2), 87-98.

A.   Teaching Implications from Research

1.   Field, J. (2005). Intelligibility and the Listener: The Role of Lexical Stress. TESOL , 39(3), 399-423. doi:10.2307/3588487

APPENDIX D

INTRODUCTION TO KEONI'S LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

One of the most salient features of spoken English is its strong prosodic nature, brought about through the interplay of syllable and word stress, intonation and rhythm. It would seem reasonable, therefore, that this element of English deserves a level of prominence in TESOL pedagogy, with the development of best practice techniques toward integrating prosodic skills into the learner's ongoing SLA. Indeed, in the last three decades, research has made a significant shift in focus from segmentals toward suprasegmentals (prosody) "as the key components of intelligibility enhancement and thus pronunciation instruction" (Baker, 2011, p. 264). Accordingly, what does the literature tell us about how effective the explicit teaching of these prosodic elements is in promoting SLA? And what approaches/techniques are currently being used in developing student's acquisition of English prosody, both as listeners and speakers of English? These two questions form the basis of the following review.

The first section of this review, "The Importance of Prosody", addresses the first of the two questions above, with special focus on the three prosodic elements of lexical stress, sentence stress, and intonation, along with a consideration of the relative importance of speech rate and pausing in relation to intelligibility. This section concludes with a look at teachers' attitudes toward prosody instruction. The remainder of the review outlines several broad strategies being used today in teaching prosody, including sociolinguistic and reflective learning strategies, as well as strategies that highlight prosodic input

and the use of technology. The review will conclude with some reflections on

potential future research in the field of English prosody.

APPENDIX E

CAMILA'S READING NOTES

(The following show an example of Camila's reading notes.)

Journal Summary

Preparing teachers to Support ELL

* Struggling ELL: Keys for Academic Success,
Transformational Opportunities: Lang d Lit Instructn.
for English Lan. Learn in the common Core Era in the
United States

The article titled Struggling English Language learners:
Keys for Academic Success. Yvonne Freeman and
David Freeman, present four research based keys for
literacy & academic success for struggling
English Learners.

First, Yvonne and David Freeman- discuss the
different types of English language learners
which are first newly arrived learners with adequate
formal schooling, second english learners with limited
formal school, and last there are the long term
English language learners. These students have been
in 7 or more years in the United States

The authors describe four keys for helping ELL's
become competent readers and writers. They #1
Students should be engaged in challenging, theme-Based
curriculum in order for them to develop Academic
concept. Key # 2 It's easier for ELL to develop
Academic Success when teachers draw on SS's
background, such as experiences, culture d language.
Key # 3 It's important to have Collaborative
activities & scaffold instruction to assist ss to
build ss academic English proficiency. last key
Teachers it's important to help to create Confident
students who will value school and themselves as learners

In addition they emphasize the importance
of reading stories and poems to struggling
readers and ~~mad~~ because it's the first steps
for them to enjoy good books and engage in reading

~~In conclus~~
Finally, the authors conclude that engaging
~~sts~~ ELL in projects. ~~the~~ The three ~~types~~
of ELL's will have the opportunity to work
with other students, develop their strengths
and help one another is their weak areas, but
be challenged. ~~by~~ with a curriculum that draws
on their background knowledge and culture, and
challenges academically.

You still have
to Cite ??

APPENDIX F

CAMILA'S READING MATRIX

Matrix Notes

Author	Article	Keypoints	Relationship to other text	Personal comments
① Won Gyoung Kim, Shernaz B Garcia.	Long-Term ELLs' Perceptions of Their Lang & Academic Learning Experience	• ELLs' perceptions about their schooling (program placement, special education, referral and academic outcomes) • Profile of the participants, 50% of the participants were ELLs both and (long and reclass) high retention rate during high/elementary school years. • There was not adequate support for ELLs	← Related to Olsen there is a link to B LTELL ← Types of support - Relates to Olsen.	• Students are not inform of the services that they are entitled to. • There is a great need of a strong ELD program in the secondary schools • ELD programs are not appropriate for use in the secondary level
② Jason O'Brien.	The System is Broken and It's Failing These Kids: High School Social Studies Teachers' Attributed towards Training for ELLs	• Attitudes of Florida's district teachers towards district mandated trainings they received to teach ELLs • 51% Teachers felt their training in college is ineffectively teach ELLs • 56% Teachers that the district does not offer training that would help them teach ELL as more effectively.		• Many teachers believe that unless you are the ELD teacher you are not responsible for the students learning (LTELL)

Author(s)	Article	Key Points	Relationship to other Text	Personal Connection

Kate Menken, Tatyana Kleyn, Nabin Chae — "Spotlight on Long-Term English Long Learners"

- There are 3 types of ELL: 1. literate in their L1, 2. limited or interrupted formal schooling, 3. LTELL - lose academic literacy in English and L1
- High school ESL or ELD program is not designed to meet student's needs with limited native lang. literacy skills.
  - There is an inconsistency in programming
- .5a of ELL are LTELL
- There is no formal definition of "Long Term English Learner"
  - "ELL became "Long term" English Learners in the course of their schooling experience.
  - Few districts have designated programs or formal approaches designated for LTELL.

Relationship to other Text:
- Relates to Olsen. Most programs are designed for "38" who have just arrived to the country
- Agrees with Menken. There is a high # of LTELL in secondary schools.

Laurie Olsen — Reparable Harm.

Personal Connection:
- It is important to look at the types of ELL, the schools have in order to provide more effective assistance.

④

Author	Article	Key Points	Relationship to other text	Personal Connect
Nancy Clair	Implementing Standards with English Lang. Learners: Initial Findings from Four Middle Schools	• Teachers need long-term professional development to understand standards for teaching English lang. learners • ELL & ELD teachers should work closely together to discuss what is needed to know and how content will be delivered • Teachers must understand what to document listing goals for student learning	← related to O'Brien there must be relevant training for teachers ← Agree with O'Brien Teachers must work together.	• There must be collaborating • Define the SIOP Model
Gina Estavina, Deborah Short, Kristin Powel.	School Reform & Standards-Based Education: A Model for English Lang Learners.	• SIOP model in order to ELL in secondary school • Teachers attended SIOP institute to develop an understanding of practiced strategies • Implementation of high quality instruction must be systematic	← Relates to Nancy Clair	

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