Title

Preferences, Styles, Behavior: The Composing Processes of Four ESL Students

Author

Chen, Karen

Peer reviewed

KAREN CHEN
San Francisco State University

Preferences, Styles, Behavior: The Composing Processes of Four ESL Students

■ **The present study explored patterns and individual differences in the composing processes of a group of ESL students in an academic setting. Research questions included the following:**

- **Do students demonstrate significant individual differences in the composing process?**
- **Do some students at this level have a personal composing style? If so, when was it defined and how strong/rigid is it?**
- **How do students who have their own style manage their composing process in light of course-designated composing guidelines?**

Participants were students in an ESL basic composition class. A preliminary whole-class survey was followed by interviews with a small sample of students who reported on their composing process from "zero" through the first draft. Responses showed similarities and differences in the composing process; however, differences were significant enough to be considered individualized. Thus, a one-size-fits-all approach may not serve students best in ESL composition. Implications for teaching are discussed.

Introduction

Striking a balance between *process* and *product* is considered essential for today's ESL composition classroom (Brown, 2001). Nevertheless, instruction in the composing process tends to be prescribed as the primary means for reaching the final written product (Brown, 2001; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998). Given this sustained emphasis on ESL composing processes, identifying learners' actual composing behavior can provide critical insight for classroom practice.

As a teaching assistant in a university-level basic ESL composition classroom where a process-writing approach is used, I sought to investigate students' actual composing practices in view of the techniques and strategies presented in class for idea generation, idea development, and drafting. In the context of two assigned essays, I examined students' composing behavior as they progressed from "zero" through the first draft. Specifically, the following questions were explored:

- Do students demonstrate significant individual differences in the composing process?
- Do some students at this academic level have a personal composing style? If so, when in their academic history was it defined and how strong/rigid is it?
- How do students who have their own style manage their composing process in light of course-designated composing guidelines?

From surveys and interviews with students, the current study sought to identify patterns in composing processes by which teachers may understand how ESL writers navigate the "wandering path" (Leki, 1991, p. 10) from idea generation to planning to writing.

A Review of the Literature

The process approach in ESL had its beginnings in the early 1980s, as insights from L1 writing research crossed over into L2 research, leading theorists and practitioners to rethink the ways in which composition was conventionally taught in the ESL classroom. In a turn from a final-product emphasis to an

emphasis on the *pathway* leading to the final product, techniques and strategies emerged to guide students through the stages of writing (Reid, 1993).

A survey of current and recent ESL composition textbooks, pedagogy textbooks, and university learning center Web sites (Leki, 1989; Raimes, 1983; San Francisco State University, 2003; Scane, Guy, & Wenstrom, 1994; University of Kansas, 2003; White & Arndt, 1991) suggests that the process approach to composition maintains a solid role in ESL composition instruction today. A parallel body of research indicates that ESL writers in such contexts have unique needs not shared by their native speaker counterparts (Silva, 1993, as cited in Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998). Taken together, these two factors reveal a need to substantiate how process instruction corresponds to the behaviors, needs, and preferences of ESL students engaged in the composing process.

In the years since the process approach emerged in L2 composition, several studies about ESL students' composing processes have been conducted, providing valuable insights for the ESL composition field. The studies have explored composing processes from a variety of angles, using a variety of methods. Some studies have compared native English speakers to nonnative speakers (Silva, 1990, 1992, as cited in Reid, 1993). Others have explored the use of L1 and L2 in the composing process (Friedlander, 1990, as cited in Reid, 1993). Yet other studies have researched the connection between writing skill and language proficiency (Cumming, 1986, 1989, as cited in Reid, 1993).

Shedding a different light on the process approach have been composing studies demonstrating that ESL writers pursue a creative, exploratory process to arrive at their final product. Zamel (1983), for example, examined the composing processes of six advanced learners, concluding that both skilled and unskilled writers follow a nonlinear writing process. Thus, while ESL composers did not progress from thesis to topic sentence to paragraph as with a product approach, neither did they strictly progress as expected through the prewriting, drafting, and revision stages of classic process writing. Zamel's research brought to light that process writing in practice is less clear-cut and subject to more individual differences than originally perceived. Raimes's 1985 study of unskilled L2 writers, in claiming that "students of any level of proficiency can be engaged in discovery of meaning" (p. 250), yielded the idea that students of varied proficiency levels can benefit from process writing given they receive "more of everything: more time; more opportunity [for vocabulary development] . . . more instruction and practice in generating, organizing, and revising ideas . . . more attention to the rhetorical options available to them" (p. 250). Both studies thus demonstrated that an instructional focus on the process of writing may not be enough to meet the needs of many students.

To meet ESL composition students' needs, a firm grasp of individual differences is critical. Raimes (1991, as cited in Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998) declares that "there is no such thing as a generalized ESL student" (p. 14). Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) conclude that "individual differences and institutional factors can have direct and rather specific implications for classroom practice in the ESL environment" (p. 15). As many L2 composing process studies have had sample sizes too small to allow any generalizable conclusions (Raimes, 1985), more studies are needed in this vein. Existing studies do, however, offer a glimpse at the *significance* of individual differences. Highlighting the significance of individual differences, Holmes and Moulton's article on composing processes (1994) attended to ethnic/national background differences, asking students to self-report by drawing pictures of their composing processes. While the sample size was too small to warrant any generalizations about culture-based differences, the study nevertheless confirmed that students may get to the final step of a draft by very different routes. This insight renders insufficient a one-size-fits-all approach to ESL composition instruction.

Studies focusing on specific *stages* of the composing process have also yielded similar conclusions about individual differences. A look at just one stage of the process—invention—sheds light on the uniqueness of individual processes. Spack (1984), for example, reviewed invention strategies and concluded that writers may have individualized thinking or writing processes and thus particular needs. In fact, she stated that students may actually "devise their own strategies" (p. 657). She also touched on the fact that students' needs may change *during* the course of a term, based on factors such as ability and attitude toward a technique. She thus warned against imposing specific techniques on students, encouraging teachers to instead offer options in a nonrestrictive manner. Bailey's study on invention (1993), in line with Spack's 1984 study, concluded that students "instinctively adapt invention techniques to conform to the psychological reality of the composing process" (p. 15). Liebman-Kleine's ethnographic study (1987) demonstrated a variety of interests and skill levels in different individuals in terms of invention methods. The study also concluded that her learners "[seemed] resistant to change, even rigid" (p. 107). These studies imply that individuals' composing processes may operate independently of instruction offered and that such considerations must be taken into account for instruction to effectively meet and match students' needs and preferences.

Given that every classroom can shed light about a pedagogical issue in its own right and that information about students' needs and preferences can and ought to inform teachers' pedagogical choices, this current study seeks to follow on the tails of the preceding research outcomes to explore the nature and implications of individual differences in the composing process of ESL basic composition students.

Methods

The students in the current study were individuals in a required basic composition class (the first of three levels) in the ESL track at San Francisco State University. Learners matriculate into this course in a number of ways: (a) following completion of required remedial-level ESL classes at the university; (b) as transfer students from a community college, based on the outcomes of an ESL placement exam; (c) as first-time freshmen, after completion of studies at a California high school; or (d) directly, based on the outcomes of the ESL placement exam. The class meets three times per week for a total of three hours, and the class is one semester long.

Essay assignments for the class in this study included a narrative essay due in the 4th week of the course, an expository essay due in the 9th week of the course, and a more complex expository essay due in the 12th week of the course, each worth 20 percent of the course grade. Essays were based on readings, and class instruction included the process-writing activities of prewriting, peer response, and revision. The current study focused exclusively on Essay 1 and Essay 2. See Appendix C for instructional elements leading up to Essays 1 and 2.

During the 5th week of class, I distributed an optional preliminary questionnaire to students (see Appendix D) after completion of the first essay assignment. This questionnaire sought to determine background (demographic) information of the class and to get an overview of students' composing experience with the first essay assignment. The preliminary questionnaire was also intended to identify a set of individuals to follow up with at the end of the second essay assignment and to gain a more in-depth look at the students' composing processes. In this preliminary questionnaire, I surveyed perceived difficulty level, actual (reported) composing behavior, and strategies that students found helpful during various stages of composing. The request for participation yielded 20 responses from the 25-person class.

After collection of the questionnaires and a review of the data, and before completion of the second essay assignment, I discussed the students with the master teacher to gain insights about them. I asked to see grades on

the first essay assignment and for ideas of interesting students to follow up on. I determined that an interview with a small number of participants regarding their composing processes for the second essay would be the most feasible and would yield detail that was sufficient enough to be insightful. I sought to find a group of students who could express to me in an interview their composing process from "zero" through the first draft. I determined that I would interview a set of students who demonstrated significant effort and initiative in the class, regardless of actual grades on assignments. These characteristics were sought to develop a baseline by which to compare the students.

Four students were selected and interviewed on two separate occasions. After the initial interview, more questions came to mind that warranted a second interview. All but one of the interviews were conducted in person at the university's English Tutoring Center. One interview was conducted by telephone for the student's convenience. The interview format was informal, with a general set of questions that was used as a guideline but not followed in a set way. Answers were written down in note form. See Appendix E for the interview questions.

Data from the questionnaires and interviews were assembled into tables and lists and examined quantitatively and qualitatively for patterns and differences.

Results

Survey Results

The demographic section of the questionnaire revealed the following information about the students in the class (see also Appendices A and B):

Sixteen of the students were young immigrants originating from China who have been living in the US for an average of 2-7 years. One student was a young immigrant from Belarus. The remaining 3 students were international students from Indonesia, Burma, and Taiwan. Sixteen students were junior level, three were sophomore level, and one was a freshman. Most students reported having learned English in a school environment, although a handful referred to their learning experience as both in-school and out-of-school. No students reported having had "no experience" with writing in English. Most reported "some" or "a little." Two individuals reported having had "a lot." Several students left this field blank, conceivably because the question was misperceived as a line of instructional text in the survey rather than an actual question.

The overall survey results displayed some patterns but also a great deal of individual variability. When comparing stages of the composing process for difficulty level, students found the "getting started" and "revision" stages more challenging than the "deciding on the topic" stage; whereas difficulty ratings for "deciding on the topic" spanned a broad spectrum, both "getting started" and "revision" were rated in the upper range, between 5 to 8 out of 10. When ranked independently of the other stages, "deciding on the topic" was considered "somewhat difficult" by the majority of students. "Writing the first draft" was considered "somewhat easy" by 40% of the students and "somewhat difficult" by another 40%.

In terms of the approach used for deciding on the topic, the most frequent response was "brainstorming," followed by "listing." Many students also listed "thinking" and "talking to others" as a means of identifying a topic to pursue. For "getting started," "brainstorming," "listing," and "outlining" were common responses, as was "talking to others." Students appeared to demonstrate a mix-and-match approach.

Interview Results

The four individuals displayed interesting similarities and differences. For the purposes of this study, they will be referred to by the first initial of their first names: D, Q, E, and W. As Table 1 shows, the students have many similarities in background. In particular, D and Q are very similar, and E and W display remarkable parallels. Specifically, all four

individuals are long-time immigrants, have learned English primarily in the US in a school setting, and have had at least a small amount of previous writing training. (See Appendix E for a complete set of interview questions).

Table 1
Interviewee Profiles

	"D"	"Q"	"E"	"W"
Country/language	Belarus/ Belarussian and Russian	China/Chinese	China/Chinese	China/Chinese
Number of years in US	3	6	7	7
School standing	Junior	Junior	Sophomore	Sophomore
Age	Mid-20s	Late 30s	Late teens	Late teens
Student status	Immigrant/ resident	Immigrant/ resident	Immigrant/ resident	Immigrant/ resident
Context of English learning	In the US	In the US	In the US	In the US
Manner of English learning	In school	In school	In school	In school
School level of English studies	High school	Community college	Junior high	High school
Previous writing experience	Some	Some	A little	(Blank)
Matriculation into current course	From community college (City College of San Francisco —CCSF)	From community college (CCSF and SFSU remedial classes)	From SFSU intensive remedial classes	From SFSU intensive remedial classes

The profiles shown in Table 2 display the students' self-reported perception of and attitude about the composing process, as well as the role L1 plays, if any, in the composing process.

Tables 3a-d display the composing processes for Essay 2 of the four interview subjects, as self-reported. Also included is the self-reported composing style of each individual.

Table 2
Interviewee Writing Profiles

	"D"	"Q"	"E"	"W"
How perfect do you expect your first draft to be?	The first draft is for the main idea and is primarily for himself, although drafts do not differ much because he was trained in in-class essay writing.	Pretty good: needs thesis and examples and essay form, but not necessarily explanations and definitely no focus on grammar.	Tries to make it close to perfect in terms of grammar and content.	Basically just ideas, whatever she comes up with.
Who is your audience? (teacher/grade or yourself?)	Purpose is to learn and improve, not just the grade. He is the primary audience and hopes it transfers to his teachers.	Purpose is to improve English and get a good grade.	She is the bigger audience than the teacher.	She's part of the audience because she writes things she's interested in.
Do you like writing?	Yes, but it takes work and effort. Likes math and other subjects better.	Enjoys L1 writing, but L2 writing is still difficult and wants to learn more.	Depends on mood. Likes it but not for a grade. Prefers L1.	Sometimes. Not necessarily essays but journals.
How hard is writing for you?	At this point, it takes more creativity than effort because he knows some of the basic mechanics.	Pretty hard— takes a lot of effort and time.	XXXXXXXXXX	Essays are somewhat hard. May run out of ideas and it depends on topic.
How good of a writer do you think you are?	XXXXXXXXXX	Not that good— just puts in a lot of effort.	So-so.	XXXXXXXXXX
What kinds of grades have you gotten in writing classes?	Essay 1: A- Previous classes: CCSF = As, Bs	Essay 1: A Previous classes: CCSF = C, B SFSU = A-	Essay 1: A Previous classes: SFSU = B+/A	Essay 1: B Previous classes: SFSU = B/B+
Are you good at writing in your native language? Does that make a difference?	Yes, in Belarussian. Perhaps some of the timed writing strategies transferred, but not sure.	Yes. No influence— different process.	Yes, can express herself. The two writing processes are separate.	Doesn't do it too much. Doesn't know how to write well, just read.

Tables 3a-d:

Interviewee Self-Report of Composing Process for Essay 2 (Expository Essay)

3a. Student: "D"
Process:
1. Reread the articles;
2. Picked 2 topics as assigned;
3. Freewrote on the topics, on paper;
4. Selected and discussed main ideas with classmates (this step was no help);
5. Plugged the freewrites into the computer;
6. Used the typed-up freewrites to formulate two first drafts, by reorganizing the text, completed in various sittings.

Style:
1. Reviews readings;
2. Freewrites extensively (6-7 pp.);
3. Plugs freewrites into computer;
4. Thinks and writes/types simultaneously to reorganize freewrite into a working draft.

Notes: Notebook entries can be of help. Style influenced by previous instruction in freewriting strategy and previous contexts of timed essay tests. "Plug-in" strategy is own invention.

3b. Student: "Q"
Process:
1. Thought a lot, particularly in spare moments: walking to the bus, on the bus, etc.;
2. Brainstormed topics discussed in class and generated on own possible topics;
3. Freewrote on two topics as assigned;
4. Added more thoughts to freewrite later as ideas come up;
5. Took notes on ideas (but not examples);
6. Came up with points and worked "backward" to develop thesis;
7. Talked to others to clarify thesis/main idea, in-class discussion and on own;
8. Used this rough skeleton to start drafting, looking back and forth at notes.

Style:
1. Thinks a lot throughout the process;
2. Freewrites and adds to freewrites;
3. Notes down ideas and talks to people;
4. Comes up with points;
5. Works backward toward thesis;
6. Works this rough skeleton into a draft on computer.

Notes: Style influenced in part by previous freewriting instruction. "Backward" strategy is original invention.

3c. Student: "E"
Process:
1. Chose ideas from class brainstorm that seemed particularly interesting;
2. Thought about this topic everywhere: while going home, free time;
3. Wrote freewrites on two topics as assigned;
4. Wrote more freewrites to generate more ideas;
5. Reviewed freewrites for main idea;
6. Used in-class discussion to aid main idea development;
7. Planned and organized essay in her head;
8. Started typing draft based on mental outline/skeleton;
9. Took breaks periodically, generating draft in one evening over 4-5 hours.

Style:
1. Extensive thinking;
2. Freewrites;
3. Additional freewrites;
4. Mental planning and organizing (mental outline);
5. Begins computer drafting based on mental outline.

3d. Student: "W"
Process:
1. Reviewed in-class brainstorm;
2. Reread the articles;
3. Freewrote on two topics as assigned (this step was no help);
4. Thought about past experiences and familiar movies/entertainment for ideas;
5. Made list of possible main ideas and picked one;

6. Discussed main ideas with classmates in in-class discussion;
7. Based on classmates' input, generated a "proto-thesis";
8. Before drafting, wrote on an unrelated topic to get into the mood of writing;
9. Began drafting by "going with my thoughts";
10. Typed/thought/typed/thought;
11. In the middle of the process, referred to an old, unrelated essay for ideas;
12. In the middle of the process, took a break to watch L1 (Chinese) entertainment and news and took note of ideas for paper;
13. Generated draft in one evening, over 4-5 hours, with breaks.

Style:
1. Reviews in-class brainstorm;
2. Reviews readings;
3. Thinks, lists, finds main idea;
4. Drafts by "going with thoughts";
5. (Types/thinks/types/thinks);
6. Refers to any materials that can help generate ideas.

Table 4 displays the rationale, explanation, and history behind the interviewees' composing practices.

Discussion

Survey Outcomes

The survey outcomes generated support for a representation of individual differences in the interview group (Raimes, 1991, as cited in Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998). Specifically, students displayed a tendency to mix and match their own assortment of composing strategies, such as brainstorming plus freewriting or freewriting plus outlining, and there was little identical overlap. Additionally, not all of the students mentioned the strategies introduced in class, and many students mentioned strategies not demonstrated or requested in class, such as outlining. Students also displayed novel strategies such as thinking on the bus and in the shower, which were self-initiated. These outcomes represent that stu-dents' composing processes have an independent nature, a concept captured also by Spack (1984) and Bailey (1993).

Another interesting discovery was that some students displayed a tendency to generalize beyond the scope of the survey. While the survey queried students about the first essay assignment, some students generalized their responses to represent their typical writing habits. A portion of the responses could have been misrepresented because of errors in verb tense usage (using present tense erroneously to report a past event), but several students consistently generalized to their typical experiences, using phrases such as "it depends" and "normally." This outcome suggests that students have their own established ways of approaching composition, much like the participants in Holmes and Moulton's 1994 study, lending credibility to the idea of a composing style.

Interview Outcomes

Reinforcing results in L2 composition literature (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Leibman-Kleine, 1987; Raimes, 1991, as cited in Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998), the interview group revealed that even among four individuals, significant individual differences can exist. These differences manifested themselves in a variety of ways. For example, the four students did not demonstrate an identical understanding of the composing process (see Zamel, 1983). "D" and "W" viewed the first draft as a forum for initial ideas, whereas "E" viewed the first draft as needing to be close to perfect in grammar and content. "Q" fell in between the dichotomy, expressing a desire to create a "pretty good essay," where the essentials exist but where grammar can still be ignored.

Furthermore, three of the four students shared that their stages are often integrated and overlapping, with simultaneous steps. For example, "D" talked about thinking (mental brainstorming) and writing (typing) at the same time. "Q" talked about a back-and-forth process among various steps in her

Table 4
Interviewee Self-Report— Process Analysis

	"D"	"Q"	"E"	"W"
Was there a difference in your process between Essay 1 and 2?	No.	No.	No.	No.
Did the topic or essay genre make a difference in the process?	No.	No.	No.	No.
Is this your regular way or does it depend? On what?	Yes, typical style.	Yes, has a regular way.	Yes, her style.	Yes, personal style since high school.
Did you devise this way or learn it?	A little bit of both.	Devised it.	Devised it.	Devised it.
Do you use any other prewriting strategies (listing, brainstorming, L1, thinking, talking with others, outline, clustering, other)?	Sometimes clustering. Outlines don't work. Lists don't work.	Brainstorming, listing, thinking, talking with others. Notebook entries help, but prefers new ideas.	Doesn't like outlines.	Thinking, listing, talking with classmates.
Why do you use the strategies you use?	Freewrites are helpful; learned it was a good way. Help him get started. "Gradually [takes] you to the place you wanna be."	They work for her, so she no longer uses the "old way."	It helps her with ideas. She feels comfortable with this style.	Doesn't like the restrictions of focused strategies and likes her style because it allows changing ideas. She doesn't like to be stuck.
What's your previous experience with writing and strategies?	Freewriting, brainstorming, clustering learned at CCSF.	Freewriting learned at CCSF.	High school: Outlining, listing, clustering.	High school and SFSU remedial classes.
What did you do when you got stuck?	Retrace steps and try to get back on track.	Think.	XXXXXXXX	Deletes things/ add things.
Do you use L1 to compose? Does L1 influence style of composing?	No L1 use in L2 writing. Maybe some influence due to timed writing.	No L1 use in L2 writing.	No L1 use in L2 writing.	No L1 use in L2 writing.
When did you begin sticking to your set writing process?	During the time at CCSF.	At CCSF.	High school.	High school.

composing process. These data suggest that what constitutes the process approach for one person may not correspond to the psychological reality of another. By extension, learners' psychological perception of the steps of composing may differ from the manner in which they are taught (Bailey, 1993), creating a disconnect between instruction and practice. Additionally, learners may have different definitions or understanding of the different steps or strategies presented in class. For example, brainstorming was perceived by some of the students as a mental activity and as a written activity by others. In the same vein, one student considered freewriting any notes she wrote down at any time, while the others viewed it in the classical sense of continued flow of thoughts in one sitting. Thus, learner differences in terms of perception and definition of stages and aspects of composing may confound the instructional process. Teachers may or may not be aware of such differences.

Another way in which individual differences affect process writing instruction is that students may have differing personal goals and purposes for a composition class (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998). "D" and "Q," for example, both exhibited a desire to improve and learn English writing skills from their class, whereas "W" and "E" viewed composition to a degree as a forum for self-expression. This outcome showed that students' interest and focus on process writing skills presented in class may vary.

Like the survey participants, the interviewees displayed a tendency to generalize and easily discussed habitual writing behavior, reinforcing the notion of a composing style. Each individual's style had been defined at an earlier point in his or her composing career and was somewhat stable. "Q," for example, discussed at length what she labeled a "backward" process. "W" mentioned her preference for "going with her thoughts." "D" explained his system of plugging freewrites into the computer. "E" expressed how she composed a mental outline before typing. In each case, prior composition instruction or experience

had laid the groundwork for such habits. These propensities toward a consistent personal style illustrate that an academic composition class at the level in question does not operate in a vacuum but rather within a framework of other classes, in which learners have been shaping their composing practices and style. Indeed, Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) mention the significance and influence of prior experience. The extent to which students' composing behaviors were individualized and expressed as "fixed" was surprising. It revealed that many external factors other than the classroom instruction at hand play a role in learners' composing processes. Learners bring such factors to the classroom, and teachers may not be aware of students' preferences or needs that are borne out of previous experiences with composition.

Students' actual composing behaviors may thus be significantly individualized, based on established personal preferences, previous composition instruction, experience, habit, and success. A student's style may consist of conventional strategies, novel strategies, or adapted strategies (Bailey, 1993; Spack, 1984) and may thus not mirror process writing as taught in class. To the extent that they remained true to their styles, the four students demonstrated conflicts with the steps defined for them in class. For example, "W" freewrote as required but declared it to be of no value to her. "D" likewise found class discussion fruitless for his needs; yet, he went through the motions as required. "E" adapted assignments by extending them (completing more freewrites than required), and "Q" used the freewrites in her own special way. These adaptations demonstrated self-awareness and need for freedom to explore a personal style.

In addition to revealing pertinent insights about L2 writers' composing processes, the current study exposed pertinent insights about composing process research as well. First, both the survey and the interviews demonstrated that students at this academic level are self-aware and can verbally and cognitively explore their composing practices.

This awareness appears to be due to learners' previous experience with composition instruction. Given that published composing studies have not tended to use a survey or interview approach, this discovery may suggest that teacher-researchers in the past have shied away from a retrospective self-report design. The participants' demonstrated ability to verbalize their composing practices and preferences should offer encouragement that future research can be conducted in the same vein. While several ESL composing studies have used a case study, think-aloud, or ethnography approach, thus requiring intensive observation or transcription, the current study illustrated that a survey plus interview design may be a fine alternative for time-limited teacher-researchers.

Implications

- Teachers should consider that different students have different composing habits and preferences. These habits or preferences may be deeply entrenched, which would necessitate a different approach than if the students had few set habits or preferences.
- Teachers should recognize the role of prior experience and consider that students at this academic level often have already had prior composition instruction.
- To find out students' composing habits or preferences, teachers who have the capability to do so ought to inquire informally or formally about their students' composing processes. Such data would serve as a worthwhile needs assessment to inform the teacher's subsequent decisions in terms of process instruction through the course of the term.
- Teachers should offer a variety of options to students for the stages of composing, in particular the beginning stages. They should neither dictate nor restrict strategies that work for students. Using their best judgment about strategies that will help students improve as writers, teachers should find ways to introduce and practice new composing strategies and to guide stu-

dents through seeing direct benefits of these strategies.
- Even without direct knowledge of students' composing habits and preferences, teachers can be sensitive to individual differences by acknowledging and considering them.
- Teachers should encourage students to consider their preferences and to adapt strategies to meet their personal needs as writers.
- Teachers should be sensitive that instructional guidelines may conflict with students' composing practices and allow modifications so that students will not end up engaging needlessly in "busywork."

Conclusion

The current study of ESL composing processes has illustrated that a one-size-fits-all approach may not serve students best in the ESL composition class. Rather, regardless of individual differences, teachers can support students by assessing their needs and preferences and tailoring their instruction to the perceived composing reality of their students.

As Leibman-Kleine (1987) remarks, "If processes differ, then the role of process teachers is not to impose a process, but to perceive their students' differences and then assess each one's particular needs" (p. 105). The wise classroom teacher will take heed and construct his or her instructional focus in light of students' composing history, style, and preferences.

Author

Karen Chen completed her MA TESOL studies at San Francisco State University in the fall of 2004. Her experiences during graduate school as a teaching assistant in the SFSU ESL program and as a reading/writing tutor at SFSU's Learning Assistance Center sparked a research interest in ESL composition. Karen is enjoying her new role as a teacher and has had the privilege of teaching at the American Language Institute at SFSU, in SFSU's ESL Program, and at Cañada College in Redwood City, California.

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Appendix A
Participant Profile

Native country and language
Taiwan/Mandarin—1
China/Cantonese or Mandarin or dialect—16 **(Q, E, W)**
Burma/Burmese—1
Indonesia/Indonesian—1
Belarus/Russian—1 **(D)**

Number of years in the US
1 year—2
2 years—2
3 years—2 **(D)**
3.5 years—1
4 years—5
5 years—5
6 years—1 **(Q)**
7 years—2 **(E, W)**

School standing
Freshman—1
Sophomore—3 **(E, W)**
Junior—16 **(D)**

Student status
International student—3
Immigrant/resident student—17

Where did you learn most of your English?
In the US—14 **(D, E, Q, W)**
In my home country—6

How did you learn most of your English?
In school—15 **(D, E, Q, W)**
Out of school—0; Both—5

At what school level have you studied English?

Junior high—4 **(E)**
High school—3 **(D, W)**
Community college—9 **(Q)**
University—3
Junior high, high school, and community college—1

How much writing in English have you done previously?

(blank)—4 **(W)**
A little—3 **(E)**
Some—10 **(D, Q)**
A lot—3

Appendix B
Class Survey Results

Deciding on a topic for the first draft of Essay 1 was…

very easy — —

somewhat easy   5   Reasons:
- It's not that hard to find some event in life that had ever caused change…to me.
- I have some topics to read, so I can choose one from many.
- There [are] a lot of ideas to write about.
- Think about some events that might relate to the topic.
- I can come up [with] some ideas very quickly, the only thing is sometimes, I don't know which one to choose.

somewhat difficult   11   Reasons:
- Deep meaning…intervened with complicated philosophical analysis. **(D)**
- It was hard to gather all the thoughts, and grammar errors. **(E)**
- It is very difficult to choose a fine topic since there are too [many] topics. **(Q)**
- Sometimes, it was very difficult to focus on just one topic. I [had] too many. **(W)**
- [The] topic is [most] important when you are writing.
- The main point of the topic is difficult to find out and develop.
- It is hard to find a main point.
- There are a lot of major topics I have to choose.
- It is hard to choose a topic I really have…details to support.
- I need to think about a topic which was easy to write [about] and…most interesting.
- It is hard to write down my own opinion in English.

very difficult   3   Reasons:
- Lack experience.
- I didn't know what I should talk about. And I didn't have an efficient example to support my message.
- I always don't know what I can write on the topic.

between easy and difficult   1   Reason:
- If I get some feeling or experience [on] the topic, I will think it is somewhat easy to decide. If not, it's difficult.

How did you decide on your topic?
Brainstorm/think—9 **(D)**
Brainstorm and notebook—**(E)**
Brainstorm and list—**(Q)**
Brainstorm/freewrite—1
Freewrite—2
Freewrite and list—1
List—1
Write examples—**(W)**
Outline, freewrite, and brainstorm—1
Notebook entries—2

What was the most helpful thing you did?
(blank)—2
(Not counted) —1
Construct essay in head first—1
Brainstorm/think—4
Scanning memory—1
Planning before writing—1
Thinking hard before writing—**(Q)**
Talking to friends and watching TV—1
Talking to people and thinking—1
Consulting someone with insight to topic—1
Talking to others—1
Freewrite—2 **(D)**
Freewrite/brainstorm—1
Write down every thought—**(E)**
Keep writing examples—**(W)**

Difficulty of each writing step

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 = least difficult, 10 = most difficult										
Deciding on a topic	1 (D)	1	2	2	2		5 (E)	2	2 (W) (Q)	3
Getting started		1		3	5 (D)	3 (E)	7 (W) (Q)			1
Revising		1		5	2 (Q) (E)	3 (W)	5 (D)	4		

Writing the first draft of Essay 1 was…

very easy   1   Reasons:
• No special requirements. No grammar. Just content. **(D)**
• I have decided the topic already.

2b. Were some things harder/easier?
• Easier: Grammar and organization
• Harder: To keep it short and simple so the teacher can see the difference (between drafts).

somewhat easy   8   Reasons:
• I can write whatever.
• It was just a story.
• I didn't need to worry about my grammar or grade; T will give…advice.
• It is based on my experience and I just jot down what I remember.
• I can write everything without [worrying about] grammar and content.
• I don't need to care [about] grammar, development, and ideas.
• I don't have to check grammar and I just write the same as the freewrite.

2b. Were some things harder/easier?
(blank)—1
• General comments for easier: The first draft seemed to be easy overall **(D)**; it was all right.

- General comments for harder: It feels hard; some things were harder.
- Easier: To record what happened plainly.
- Harder: To make the point meaningful, to convey a good message, to make them smoothly connected; to express what I want to say; trying to give specific examples and description to make the idea clearer; to [create] a message.

somewhat difficult	8	Reasons:

- It was hard to develop the details. **(E)**
- It's the basic shape of the final essay. I have to shape it well. **(Q)**
- Writing topic sentences is hard. Essay development is hard too. **(W)**
- It's not easy to obtain all requirements.
- I need to think more deeply, and the most difficult part is to put my feeling and idea in words.
- I was afraid that I had nothing to write about.
- Sometimes, even though I have a topic to write about, later on, I find nothing to actually write about or I don't know how to expand my topic.
- I had trouble [explaining] what I really wanted to say.

2b. Were some things harder/easier?
- Easier: Writing general ideas.
- Harder: Grammar; to choose appropriate vocabulary while expressing my feelings and thoughts **(Q)**; extending the topic sentence **(W)**; to make my message general; ideas and grammar; to write details and explanation.
- Other comments: All my other schoolwork was easier, except for reading my physics textbook; depends on the topic.

very difficult	3	Reasons:

- I have no idea what I can write [about].
- It was hard to write what I thought because the ideas that came to my brain were a mess.
- [It was hard to get the ideas out.]

2b. Were some things harder/easier?
- Harder: To decide a message to match essay question; to describe my feelings.
- Easier: To freewrite because I didn't pay close attention to grammar; to describe the processing of the event.

How did you get started with writing?

Brainstorm + cluster + list—**(D)**
Brainstorm + freewrite—**(E)**
Consult notebook entry, brainstorm—**(Q)**
List only—**(W)**

Conventional strategies:
- Outline only—2
- List or outline—5
- Freewrite + outline—1
- Brainstorm + freewrite—1
- Notebook entry only—1
- List + notebook entry + consult others' essays—1

Uncategorized responses:
• I just write down what I remember.
• I just write what I think without an outline.
• I usually wrote, but I didn't use my method.
• I found something as my beginning first. What I should start with is important.
• Depends on the kind of essay. Normally, I spend a lot of time to write the whole essay in my head first because it's easy to make changes.

What was the most helpful thing you did?
• Clustering **(D)**
• Brainstorming + freewriting **(E)**
• Brainstorming and comparing ideas **(Q)**
• Try to write more ideas and write examples for the ideas **(W)**
• Talk to friends
• Take notes about my topic…before the outline
• Catch all the ideas that flash on my brain
• Outline—3
• Thinking about topic in spare time
• Brainstorming
• A quiet environment
• Sitting at the library
• Gathering advice and information from tutors and classmates
• I thought of the event step by step
• The articles I read gave me some ideas
• Compare the topics I've chosen, think about the difficulties of each one, and try to compose in my mind first
• (blank)—2

How did you work on your ideas between Drafts 1 and 2?
• I slept. **(D)**
• Read the teacher's comments. **(E)**
• Considered teacher's comments **(Q)**
• Try to pick out all the ideas, then write extended examples. **(W)**
• Go further and deeper to explore the idea.
• Make the point meaningful and try to smooth connections.
• Make an outline.
• Asked, what is my message and generalization to reader?
• Ask myself if my ideas are clear for my reader.

• Make the ideas clearer to the reader.
• Make it more clear.
• I read through once more and tried to add more details to make my idea clear.
• Changed some small things, like examples, and made points clear.
• I will add more details and rewrite.
• See if any other examples would be useful to add or delete.
• Revise my content, connections, whole structures of draft.
• Annotation and revising message and notes from teacher.
• Follow my professor's comments.
• Reading instructor's comment and reading first draft again.
• It depends on suggestions from my teacher.

What was the most helpful thing you did?
• I left my writing for a while, then reread it. **(D)**
• Listed out what I wanted to correct. **(E)**
• Inserting some details and examples in my essay. **(Q)**
• Keep on thinking and writing. Sometimes I would write topic sentences and examples in my native language. It makes me understand the idea better. **(W)**
• Reread the whole essay and kind of taste it and feel it. Sometimes I can find some errors or new ideas.
• Summarizing what I thought + gathering advice from others.
• Compared with other essay. I found what I needed to add.
• Sharing my draft with other students.
• The instructor's comments.
• Get people's advice, including teacher's and classmates'.
• Thinking in my spare time.
• Spending time to reread, revise.
• Make content better.
• Add more explanation.
• Try to make sure what I want to express on the topic.
• To prepare what I missed for the first draft.
• Revising the message.
• (blank)—3

Appendix C
Instructional Elements

Lead-Up to Essay 1 First Draft
- Focus of class will be getting started and coming up with ideas;
- Readings, one by one;
- Freewriting introduction and practice (for getting started with topic and main idea);
- Notebook entry introduction and practice (for generating ideas);
- Class brainstorm of strategies for before, during, and finishing up writing;
- Notebook assignments (to respond to reading);
- Summary-writing introduction and practice;
- Group discussion and summarizing;
- Essay 1 guidelines explained;
- Comparing notebook entry assignment and first draft assignment;
- Exploring ideas in readings;
- Reviewing and analyzing model (bad) student essay;
- Submit first draft;
- (Followed by revision, peer review (2nd draft), proofreading, final draft).

Lead-Up to Essay 2 First Draft
- Readings and notebook entry assignments;
- Reviewing and analyzing model (bad) student essay;
- Comparing nature of expository and narrative essay, by example;
- Class brainstorm possible topics;
- Pick two topics and freewrite on them;
- In-class looping (focused freewriting) exercise using one freewrite done as homework;
- Structure and guidelines of expository essay;
- Use freewrites to come up with opinions (main ideas) on a topic;
- Main idea guidelines;
- Group evaluation of model main ideas;
- Review of "getting started" strategies (freewriting, brainstorm, looping);
- Group evaluation of students' main ideas;
- First draft;
- (Followed by descriptive outline of first draft, personal revision plan, supporting point guidelines, conferences, "introduction and conclusion" workshop, sample student draft analysis).

Specific Composing Strategies Expressed as Instructional Guidelines (Before Revision)
- Essay 1: notebook entries, freewriting, class brainstorm
- Essay 2: the above, plus looping and peer evaluation of main ideas

Essay Assignment 1—Narrative (Unit: Turning Points)
Write an essay in which you explain how a turning point in your life changed you, your life, your values, or the way you see yourself or others.

Essay Assignment 2—Expository (Unit: Personal Identity)
Write an expository essay which is focused on a main idea (which expresses a strong original **opinion** of your own) that relates to one of the topics or issues we have read about and discussed in this unit.

Appendix D
Student Survey

Dear class,
I am interested in finding out about your experiences with writing for a research project I am doing for one of my classes. Would you please help me by filling out this survey? I greatly appreciate your help!

ABOUT YOU (Please fill in the blank or circle your response.)

1. **Name** (if you are willing to tell me):
   _____

2. **Native country and language:**
   _____

3. **Number of years in the US:**
   _____

4. **School standing:**
   Freshman
   Sophomore
   Junior
   Senior
5. **Student status:**
   International student
   Immigrant/Resident student
6. **Where did you learn most of your English?**
   In the US
   In my home country
7. **How did you learn most of your English?**
   In school
   Out of school
   Both
8. **At what school level have you studied English?**
   Junior high
   High school
   Community college
   University
9. **How much writing in English have you done previously?**
   None
   A little
   Some
   A lot

SURVEY QUESTIONS ABOUT **WRITING** (Please fill in the blank or circle your response.)

1a. **Deciding on a topic** for the *first draft* of Essay 1 was…
   Very easy
   Somewhat easy
   Somewhat difficult
   Very difficult
   Why? _____
1b. How did you decide on your topic? (Did you use your notebook entries or freewrites? Did you brainstorm? Did you just think of something? Did you use another method?)

   _____

   What was the most helpful thing you did?
   _____

2a. **Writing** the *first draft* of Essay 1 was…
   Very easy
   Somewhat easy
   Somewhat difficult
   Very difficult
   Why? _____
2b. When you were writing your first draft, were some things easier to do? Were some things harder to do? Which ones?

   _____

2c. Please look at the following items. Please tell me how hard each of these writing steps was for you, rating from 1 to 10 (1 = *very, very easy* and 10 = *very, very difficult*).
   _____ Deciding on a topic
   _____ Getting started
   _____ Revising (going from first draft to second draft)
3. How did you get started with writing? (Did you make a list or outline? Did you use parts of your notebook entry? Did you use another kind of method?)

   _____

   What was the most helpful thing you did?
   _____

4. In between the *first draft* and *second draft*, how did you work on your ideas?

   _____

   What was the most helpful thing you did?
   _____

Appendix E
Interview Questions

Set 1:
1. For Essay 2, what was the process you followed to get from the very beginning to the end of the first draft (what did you do to gather, develop, and organize your ideas)?
2. Was the process different from Essay 1?
3. Do you have a regular way (do you always do the same thing)? Was the process your regular way, or does your process change depending on the assignment?
4. Is this a way that you came up with or that you learned?

5. (If there's a regular way) When did this become your system? What influenced that?
6. In English 209, we learned freewriting, notebook entries, and looping. Do you use any of the other strategies, such as using your first language, brainstorming, thinking, making a list, talking with other people, outlining, clustering, other?
7. Why do you use the strategies you use?
8. What is your previous experience with writing and strategies?
9. What did you do when you got stuck?
10. Did the topic or type of essay make a difference?

Set 2:
11. How perfect/complete does the first draft need to be, in your perspective?
12. Do you write primarily for the teacher (i.e., grade), or for yourself as well (are you also part of the audience)?
13. Do you like writing?
14. How hard is writing for you?
15. How good of a writer do you think you are?
16. What kind of grades have you gotten in writing classes? What kind of writing classes have you taken?
17. Are you good at writing in your native language? Does that influence your writing in English?
18. Do you ever use your first language to help you compose?