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Coping Strategies of ESL Students in Writing Tasks Across the Curriculum

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Writing research has given us few accounts of the writing experience of ESL students outside the English or writing classroom. This article reports a qualitative research study of 5 ESL visa students in their first semester of study at a U.S. university. The goal of the research was to examine the academic literacy experiences of these students in light of the strategies they brought with them to their first academic experience in the U.S. and the strategies they developed in response to the writing demands they encountered in their regular courses across the curriculum. The results of this study give us an in-depth and detailed picture of this group of ESL students at the initial stages of acquiring discipline-specific discourse strategies not in the English classroom but while fully engaged in the struggle to survive the demands of disciplinary courses. In the tradition of qualitative research, this report is at the same time fully embedded in a narrative of these students' experiences, giving us a picture not only of students learning to write but also of human beings negotiating the exhilarating and sometimes puzzling demands of U.S. academic life.

ESL language and writing classes have been the locus of classroom oriented research, case studies, and experimental design research for some time now. We have an excellent research base on the writing and the writing processes of both ESL and native-English-speaking (NES) writers (see Krapels, 1990, for a review of ESL student writing processes; see Silva, in press, for a review of differences between ESL and NES writers and their products). Research on NES students in higher education has, however, moved beyond the English classroom and followed small numbers of NES students into their disciplinary courses and has, as a result, given us both articles and book-length studies of writing demands across the curriculum and NES students' responses to those demands (Chiseri-Strater, 1991; Conklin, 1982; Haas, 1994; Herrington, 1985; McCarthy, 1987; Nelson, 1990; Walvoord & McCarthy, 1990). In ESL, English for academic purposes

(EAP) researchers have also tried to give us an idea of what writing life is like for ESL students outside the ESL classroom and beyond the English curriculum (Horowitz, 1986 a, b; Johns, 1981). Leki and Carson's (1993) survey of ESL students' perceptions of their writing needs attempts to gauge how well EAP writing courses articulate with writing demands across the curriculum. But we need at once closer looks at individual students and broader looks not only at their English classes but at their lives as they negotiate their way through higher education once they step outside the safe threshold of the ESL classroom. Little ESL research reports on the classrooms ESL students enter across the curriculum. Prior (1992) examined the permutations of task and response in six graduate courses which included L2 writers. Johns (1991) closely followed a student and his successes in writing for his biology class and his failures in passing an institutionally mandated writing exam. Currie (1993) focused particularly on the varying requirements for a series of writing assignments in a business course. But for the most part, L2 writing research has concentrated on issues surrounding the teaching of writing rather than on L2 students and their academic literacy experiences beyond writing classes.

L2 researchers have also been interested in learning strategies for general language learning (what does a good language learner do?), in unconsciously employed writing strategies (as part of L2 writing process research), and in strategy training for language learning and implicitly for writing. Oxford (1990) and Wenden and Rubin (1987) extensively examine language learning strategies, and Rost (1993) has compiled a listing of these strategies and their perceived usefulness and teachability. Strategy training for writing has been either oriented toward determining what good writers do and then teaching those presumably good strategies to other less experienced writers (e.g., Zamel, 1983) or, at a more microlevel, aimed at helping students understand what an assignment is asking them to do and formulate ideas about how to get words on the page and organize them appropriately in response to the task (Johns, 1993). If we are to consider the possible role of writing strategy training in ESL writing courses, we need to have some idea of what these students already know how to do, consciously or not. The descriptive study here focuses more broadly on ESL visa students' lives outside the ESL and/or writing classroom and on the strategies they bring to their writing tasks across the curriculum.

Finally, the EAP curriculum questions the validity of training in general writing and general English language as a preparation for genre-specific writing (Connor & Johns, 1989). Yet persuasive arguments have also been made against attempting to teach discipline-specific discourses in EAP classes (Spack, 1988); surely, those who do not participate as conversation partners in a discourse are hardly in a

position to teach the explicit, let alone implicit, rules of that conversation to others (Leki, 1995). It is unlikely that ESL teachers or researchers interested in EAP support the notion that the mere forms of disciplinary discourses are worthy subjects for teaching or learning in EAP courses. That is, an EAP curriculum cannot legitimately teach discipline-specific discourse but rather would seek to determine what might best prepare students to acquire discipline-specific discourses, what tools would be useful to them in their accommodation to the demands of various disciplines. Yet we know little about how ESL students acquire forms and attitudes specific to various disciplinary discourses or how their experiences in disciplinary courses shape their understandings of appropriate and inappropriate discourse within those disciplines.¹

The goal of this naturalistic study was to begin to establish baseline data of this type without categories preconceived by either the investigator or the participants but rather naturally emerging in the course of the participants' normal engagements with real assignments as a part of their regular course work in classes across the curriculum.

Through this study I hoped to develop insights into the academic literacy experiences across the curriculum of 5 ESL students in their first term at a U.S. university and to see these experiences through their eyes. This type of emic perspective on ESL students' experiences is best constructed through the use of qualitative research methods for data collection and analysis.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants for the study were selected from among ESL students enrolling at a large state university in the U.S. for the first time in fall semester 1992. Approximately 60 students initially expressed interest in participating in the study. Parameters for selection included no previous experience with a U.S. educational institution and enrollment during that first semester in courses requiring a significant amount of writing as part of the normal course work. To assure some variety in the students' experiences, the final selection reflects, to the extent possible, differences in gender, home country, year in school, and academic subject areas. The participants were 3 graduate students and

¹For the moment, all of these considerations leave to the side the important political issues of accommodation versus resistance as articulated in several published articles over the last few years. See, for example, Allison, 1994; Benesch, 1993; Santos, 1992.

TABLE 1
Coping Strategies of ESL Students in Writing Tasks Across the Curriculum

Background	Participants				
	Ling	Julie	Tula	Jien	Yang
Country	Taiwan	France	Finland	China	China
Class status	Undergraduate	Undergraduate	Graduate	Graduate	Graduate
Major	Business	Business	Speech	Education	Political science
Gender	Female	Female	Female	Female	Male
Age	34	21	29	31	32
TOEFL score	527	617	597	627	617
English course	Required	Required but dropped	Not required	Required	Not required

2 undergraduates. This distribution permits observation of strategies employed both by students being initiated into disciplinary communities (the graduate students) and by students whose familiarity with disciplinary modes of discourse in the courses they were taking was likely to be slighter (the undergraduates). Ling² is a female undergraduate from Taiwan, a junior-year business major; Julie is a female undergraduate from France, also a junior business major; Tula is a female graduate student from Finland in Audiology and Speech Pathology; Jien is a female graduate student from China in Education; and Yang is a male graduate student from China in Political Science (see Table 1).

All of these students had TOEFL scores above 525, the minimum required for admission to the university. On the basis of the in-house placement exam required of all incoming students, Tula and Yang were exempted from any further work in English; Julie was placed into first semester freshman composition for ESL students (which she subsequently dropped); and Jien and Ling were required to enroll in a credit-bearing ESL reading/writing/grammar course at a prefreshman composition level.

Although all participants were enrolled in classes which required a significant amount of writing, not all classes in which they were enrolled were appropriate for analysis in this study. Julie was taking a Spanish class, for example, which required writing, but in Spanish. In other cases, participants' classes took place at times when I was unavailable

²In the interests of protecting the students' privacy, all names are fictional. In keeping with qualitative research methodology, all participants signed an Informed Consent form informing them of their rights. During an initial meeting participants were fully informed of the nature, purpose, and procedures of the research, offered the opportunity to review tapes and/or transcripts of their interviews, and assured of measures that would be taken to insure confidentiality of any information obtained from or about them.

to observe them. Finally, in the interest of simply managing work load, as the semester progressed, I focused my attention more intensely on some courses than on others. Courses observed were for Ling, both Behavioral Geography and World History; for Julie, American History; for Tula, Structural Disorders in Speech; for Jien, Foreign Language Teaching Methodology; and for Wang, Comparative Government and Politics.

All of the students generally performed quite successfully in their courses and in their writing tasks during their first semester at a U.S. university.

Data Collection

Sources of data included interviews with the student participants, interviews with their professors, observations of the classes I decided to focus on for each student, and examination of documents including all written materials distributed for those courses and everything the students wrote for the courses (class notes, exams, drafts of assignments, and final drafts with teachers' comments and evaluations). In addition, the participants kept journals in which they recorded anything of importance to them that occurred in relation to their academic experiences. The extensive amount and the variety of data sources were intended to ensure triangulation of the information gathered to contribute to a more complex, richer, and thicker, as Geertz (1983) describes it, ethnographic description than might be possible through the examination of single data sources.

Each of the 5 students was interviewed in my office once a week for most of the semester.³ The interviews lasted about an hour each time, and all were transcribed. At least one professor (and as many as four professors) of each of the students was interviewed for approximately 1 hour; these interviews were also transcribed.

Data Analysis

In keeping with qualitative research methods, analytic induction (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) was used to analyze the transcribed interview data. In this approach, the researcher returns repeatedly to transcripts or other documentation to reread and reexamine the data, searching for salient or recurring themes. Individual strategies (e.g., Julie's strategy of recopying the words of the writing prompt in essay exams in her history course) are then grouped under similar rubrics

³For academic or personal reasons, the participants were occasionally unable to meet with me. Thus, the total number of interview sessions with a given student ranges from 8–13.

(e.g., under Focusing Strategies) as a means of managing the attendant cognitive load and permitting analysis of categories and comparisons across categories. (For examples of comparable methods of data analysis, see Chiseri-Strater, 1991; Cumming, 1992; Currie, 1993; Haas, 1994; Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Walvoord & McCarthy, 1990.) Analytic induction was used to identify methods these participants used to approach and complete the writing tasks assigned them over the course of the semester (see below for complete descriptions).

Because so little research exists in this area, at this point in our understanding of the types of strategies ESL students bring to their writing tasks across the curriculum or develop in response to them, we need a picture of the fullest range possible of strategies employed, that is, a catalogue. Thus, each approach or strategy mentioned or implied in the interview transcripts was noted. This mass of specific strategic moves was then repeatedly examined for possible logical groupings that might suggest themselves. To achieve a broad overview for ease of comprehension, the widely varying strategies these participants employed were finally subsumed under 1 of 10 categories of strategies suggested by the cataloguing, although for any given assignment these writers might employ several strategies either at once or in sequence to complete an assignment. The following is a list of the categories that emerged from recursive considerations of specific strategies the participants mentioned.

1. Clarifying strategies
2. Focusing strategies
3. Relying on past writing experiences
4. Taking advantage of first language/culture
5. Using current experience or feedback
6. Looking for models
7. Using current or past ESL writing training
8. Accommodating teachers' demands
9. Resisting teachers' demands
10. Managing competing demands

Each of these strategy categories is discussed in detail below

The type of in-depth investigation of a small number of cases represented in this study does not lend itself to quantifying data because quantification would lead to distortion of the relative importance of the strategies displayed. Furthermore, although the number of times a particular strategy is mentioned may be meaninglessly small, that strategy may have great repercussions, both for that student writer

and for our understanding of the range of strategies we need to be aware of and potentially to make other students aware of. See, for example, the discussion below on resistance as a strategy.

Furthermore, the advantage of a qualitative research methodology for this type of research is precisely the rich picture we achieve of individuals' complex motivations, talents, energies, and histories as they struggle with varying external demands (the requirements of a course assignment) and more internally driven factors they must account for, such as their image of themselves as developing professionals or their decisions about the appropriate distributions of their time. Although further research employing different types of methodologies (e.g., surveys) would potentially add to this catalogue of strategies, the methodology employed here provides a rich beginning which roots our understanding in the human implications of particular strategies. Consistent with reports of qualitative research, narrative elements allow us to see how these strategies play out in real lives.

RESULTS

Case Profiles

Although different students in this study used strategies to varying degrees, they all also displayed the flexibility necessary to shift among strategies as needed. To show how these strategies played out in the actual lives of these students, the following is an account of the distinct and shifting constellations of strategies that each student elaborated over the course of the term.

I am Chinese. I take advantage. (Ling)

One of Ling's initial strategies seemed to be a form of relying on past experience to complete assignments, and she seemed to remember past experience as consisting of going to the library and reading books. Her first assignment in her Behavioral Geography class (which examines how behavior intersects with physical space), where Ling was the only international student, required an implicit and sophisticated knowledge of everyday U.S. culture that was far out of the reach of a student just arrived in the U.S. for the first time from Taiwan. An appealing assignment for the U.S. students in the class, the task was to place a hypothetical group of people into fictional neighborhoods by determining in broad terms their socioeconomic class through an examination of certain personal characteristics, whether, for example, they drink Budweiser or Heineken, read *GQ* magazine or *Track and Field*, drive a Dodge or a Saab. To complete the assignment, Ling's

initial response was to try to rely on what had worked for her in the past, and in her interviews she repeatedly made comments such as “[I] must go to library and get some information, read some book.” In what book she hoped to find this information on who drinks Budweisers is unclear. Luckily, as the due date for the assignment approached, she abandoned this strategy, one which would certainly not have worked.

Instead Ling used a backup strategy. Though she was a shy, seemingly timid person, she successfully appealed for help to a U.S. student in the class who seemed friendly and with her help was able to successfully complete the assignment. Ling increasingly extended this strategy of appealing for clarification to her teachers as well. For example, her history professor announced that the first exam would be both short answer and essay. Not knowing what those words meant, Ling felt she could not properly prepare for the exams, and she approached him for clarification, as she continued to do with several of her professors.

But the strategy that Ling used most effectively was taking advantage of first language/culture by relying on her special status as an international student. As the semester went on, she attempted to incorporate something about China or Taiwan into every piece of writing she did, saying, “I am Chinese. I take advantage.” Thus, her term paper in Behavioral Geography became a comparison of Taiwanese and U.S. shopping habits. Her term paper in World History became a comparison of ancient Chinese and Greek education and this despite her history professor’s direct request that she not focus yet again on China. In this case she used a combined strategy of resisting the professor’s request and of reliance on her special status as a Chinese person, and it worked.

I like to make long sentences that are maybe not very clear, but my philosophy teachers [in high school] liked that. And so I prefer philosophy to French [language and literature class] because in French you had to be too precise. (Julie)

Of the 5 students, probably the most successful academically and socially was Julie, from France. Whereas Ling seemed to develop strategies ad hoc in response to needs and pressures, Julie came equipped with a clear, conscious approach to her work that served her well. Of particular interest are her strategies for focusing and for using past writing experiences. When Julie sat down to write an exam or to write a paper in response to a writing assignment, her first move was to copy word for word the exam question or the directions for the assignment on to the top of her sheet. She explained during an interview that physically writing out the words of the assignment or the writing prompts helped her to tune out all other distractions and intensify her concentration; it allowed her mind to play with the meaning of

the words in the assignment as she was preparing to write. Second, although she, like the other students, was apprehensive about writing in an English-medium institution for the first time and did not quite know what would be expected of her, she had been carefully trained in high school in French rhetorical style and said that if she felt disorganized, she could always fall back on the classic French three-part framing strategy for writing essays, that is, thesis/antithesis/synthesis—look at a topic and develop a position, a counterposition, and a synthesizing position. Although the rigidity of the structure hemmed her in and constrained the expansive style she preferred, it also appeared to her as a surefire organizational approach that would keep her on topic if she felt she was straying. On her first midterm in American History, she used the tripartite French style; when the graded exams were returned, she was one of only two people in this class of about 75 to receive 90 points out of a possible 100.

She also employed a strategy of resistance to the professor's demands or requirements. Her term paper in the history course was to be a focused commentary on a particular novel; the students were to discuss the novel's portrayal of southern U.S. women in the 1950s. When she read the novel, however, she found herself interested in only one of the women and wrote only about this one despite the directions to consider all the women. Although she expressed some concern about her choice, she nevertheless stayed with her decision, this time not following the these/antithesis/synthesis format nor the teacher's directions to consider all the women in the novel but instead rewriting the terms of the assignment to suit what she thought she could do best. Her grade for this paper was also A.

If you are a stutterer, you don't want to speak. You just avoid to speaking situations. (Tula)

Tula, the graduate student from Finland in Audiology and Speech Pathology, employed an interesting combination of resistance and accommodation to her professor's assignments. Because of the way her writing assignments were structured, Tula was able to get fair amounts of feedback early on and to alter her next assignments to accommodate the professor's requests. Tula's first real writing experience was a review of two professional research articles for a speech pathology course in structural disorders. The teacher had developed an elaborate and carefully prepared description of the assignment, which included among other things, the requirement to list at least five of the researchers' basic assumptions. Tula was quite pleased with the evaluation of her first attempt at writing, 16 points out of a possible 20, but realized that she had lost the 4 points on the section of her review that called for an analysis of those basic assumptions. On her returned paper,

her professor had written out in fairly great detail the assumptions she had expected to find there. For example, where Tula had written

Authors . . . used 16 subjects in their study. Nine of them were male and seven female. All the subjects had complete unilateral cleft lip and palate and they all were northern European ancestry,

the professor wrote “The . . . subjects were assumed to accurately represent the whole . . . population.” But Tula said that all she could tell from the professor’s corrections was that each notation had the word *assume* or *assumption* in it. When Tula went to see the teaching assistant (TA) for the course, the TA simply advised her to use the words *assume* or *assumption* throughout that section. When I asked Tula again after the professors’ corrections and after her conference with the TA what the professor meant by asking the students to identify the research article’s basic assumptions, she said she was still unable to grasp what the professor was getting at, but from then on Tula included in each article review the word *assume* or *assumption*, and from then on she received full credit for her answers. The strategy of complete accommodation had worked.

But of the 5 cases here, Tula had the most interesting and profound form of resistance as well. A major assignment in the Speech Pathology class was for the students to pretend for 4 hours that they were stutterers so that these future clinicians would know what it must be like to live in the world as a stutterer. Tula had initially been intrigued by this assignment and looked forward to discovering how it would feel to be a stutterer. But when she talked to me after turning in the assignment several weeks later, she admitted that instead of following the directions to pretend to be a stutterer for 4 hours and to report on the experience, she had simply made the whole paper up out of her head. Her rationale was that her nonnative English speech was embarrassing enough to her and probably elicited responses that were similar to responses to the speech of a stutterer; and besides a real stutterer’s most prominent speech characteristic is to avoid talking at all, and so that was what she did. Her grade for the paper was A, and she was particularly complimented for the fine job she did in documenting the exact speech characteristics she used in pretending to be a stutterer.

I’m the English teacher. (Jien)

Jien, the Chinese graduate student in education, was probably the most conscious of the 5 students about the strategies she used. For example, not only did she make a point of visiting her professor in her office during her office hour in order to get to know her better, but she timed the visit to come exactly 20 minutes into the office hour,

she said, so that the professor would have a little time to rest without students bothering her immediately after her class the previous hour.

An English teacher herself, Jien was very much concerned to meet her own self-imposed high standards of excellence in her first writing experiences at a U.S. university. She repeatedly said things like "I need to be perfect . . . because my major is English. I'm the English teacher. I'm supposed to know this well." The first assignment in her foreign language teaching methodology class was to read a professional article and write a summary and commentary on it. The whole paper was to be only two pages. In describing the assignment, the teacher spent a great deal of class time, perhaps 20 minutes, describing the American Psychological Association (APA) referencing system she expected her students to use. When I asked Jien during an interview about the purpose of this two-page assignment, she said it was to see "whether we can do research in this field." She said, "to write this review article I must digest what I have learned in the course, to read the textbook, and maybe to find other reference books." Adopting a strategy of looking for professional models to give her an idea of what might be expected of her, she turned to a review article from the *TESOL Quarterly*. She wrote elaborate drafts, recopying them carefully by hand, moving paragraphs around, recopying again neatly, eliminating paragraphs, and again recopying neatly. She finally produced five pages, which she was then forced to trim to two because the professor had been quite insistent about not wanting more than two pages. Her article review was a very sophisticated and intellectual piece of work. When her paper was returned, of a maximum of 3 possible points Jien only got 2, with a point being taken off because she had used some non-APA forms in her references. The whole experience was quite deflating for her. Despite stereotypes of group-oriented Chinese, this woman was extremely competitive and was disappointed that others had 3 points and she had only a 2. Furthermore, her attempt to take a thoroughly intellectual, rigorous, professional approach to reviewing her article was trivialized by the teacher's response, limited solely to the formatting of her bibliography. She was further demoralized by her realization that to write their papers, her classmates had merely drawn on their everyday experiences as teachers, parents, or language learners. They had done something simple and easy, while Jien had labored mightily, describing her own approach this way: "Before, I thought if I asked to write something I think maybe I need to have some theoretical base or something. Actually I avoid the simple things, the easiest things, but chose the difficult things." But once she heard her classmates talking about their reviews, she said: "I feel, Oh, what I have, I am really an outsider . . . I didn't do what others do. I don't know!"

Jien depended heavily on models as a writing strategy, on seeing “what others do.” But grossly overestimating what was expected was also a regular habit of hers, possibly the result of her sense of herself as a professional. Her main mode of operation was to overdo whatever was required and then to take feedback on her work but also feedback given to her classmates as a model for what she should do next.

When I write a paper, I have to think carefully, and when I make an argument, I have to make sure that it is a strong argument that cannot be argued against. (Yang)

Yang, the Chinese graduate student in political science, in his first writing experience in his first political science class in a U.S. university, was asked to read several articles and book chapters on international relations and write a critical discussion of them. When his paper was returned, it was criticized for not being more critical. Yang said that the professor wanted him to

find out the weak points . . . and my own ideas based on my reading. It should be critical and it should be my own and so first I have to discover, you know, the weak points or something that author doesn't make clear, or the author is not right.

He said he found that difficult, but not for the usual reasons we often read that Chinese writers have difficulty being critical, that they are reluctant to express their own opinions, and that they tend to depend heavily on the authority of others. Yang analyzed his problem differently. In his analysis, the reason professors could be so critical and he could not was because

I haven't done as much reading as the professor has . . . a typical professor probably has read, you know, the book again and again . . . He teaches same course many times and he reads it every time he teaches it so of course he has . . . more, better comparison between this author and other authors and this author's ideas and other authors' ideas. But for a student . . . our reading is much more narrow. Just narrow within the range of the reading list.

Yang also said his previous training had impeded him but not in the way we might predict. In China he had studied political science for 1 year with a U.S. professor and in that year had got used to the requirements of that professor. Then he went on to Zimbabwe to study for 2 years, and his first papers there were unsuccessful. Why? He said

because they said you put in too much of your own ideas. We're not interested in your ideas. Your ideas are not authoritative. That's what they said to me. So they said, you must quote, basically, the basic thing is you quote and you cite the author. So I thought I learned that lesson. So the

first paper I did here, I did the same thing. I quoted a lot and I mentioned a lot of authors' ideas and their points and I didn't put in much of my own. I wasn't critical, not much criticism, not much comments. So that wasn't a good paper here. They have very different requirements.

Like Jien, Yang felt the assignments in his international relations class were practice exercises intended to initiate students into professional behaviors. So after initially and unsuccessfully using a strategy of relying on past experience, he sought a model in his political science teacher's behavior, which he observed to be to establish the strongest arguments possible, to be sharply critical of arguments in the readings, and to look to the readings for both support and counterarguments. The requirements for writing here were radically different from those in Zimbabwe, but Yang was quickly able to shift strategies to meet the new circumstances. Once he was able to gauge what the new requirements were, his work received excellent evaluations from his professors in China, in Zimbabwe, and in the U.S.

Strategies

Analysis of the data shows that the strategies these students employed were both numerous and diverse, with different individuals relying on them to differing degrees. For ease of comprehension, I have grouped the strategies into 10 categories.

Clarifying Strategies

The participants used these to make sure they understood what was being required of them in assignments. This category includes

- talking to the teacher specifically to understand the assignment better or, in one case, to understand even the teacher better as a person
- talking to other students about the assignment
- asking for specific feedback on, for example, a project proposal before doing the project
- trying to interpret the teacher's purpose in an assignment.

This last example includes Jien and Yang's attempts to extend their sense that the purpose of various writing assignments was to initiate them into their professions as English teacher and political scientist, respectively. Clarification in this case meant undertaking to determine and imitate what it is that English teachers and political scientists would do with the task assigned and how the assigned activity would fit into a professional life.

Focusing Strategies

The participants used these strategies to concentrate their attention on the writing task in both narrow and broad ways. These strategies include

- rereading the assignment several times
- writing out the essay exam question at the top of the essay
- or more broadly, reading books and professional articles in the content area to develop a sense of what as yet uninvestigated research niche the participant (e.g., Yang) might be able to etch out for himself.

Relying on Past Writing Experiences

All the participants (including Ling and Jien, who had not been in school for some time) referred at one time or another to past writing experiences in their efforts to accomplish their current writing tasks. In Julie's case, her training in writing in her French lycée made her entirely confident that if she found herself unable to generate something more creative, she knew she would always be able to produce a prosaic, standard, acceptable text. Tula had done a great deal of essay exam writing in Finland and so felt relatively unconcerned about the demands of essay exams here. Yang's past experience with writing worked both against him, as he initially misjudged what was expected of him based on his past experience, and then in his favor, as he tried out yet another option taken from a previous writing experience to adjust to the new demands on him.

Taking Advantage of First Language/Culture

This strategy appeared almost exclusively in Ling's work. Having been out of school for 10 years, Ling had the most difficult time of all the participants in meeting the many demands that her course work made on her. Yet, as a Taiwanese, she had access to an entire body of knowledge and experience that her classmates and even her professors lacked and that helped to compensate for other linguistic and educational disadvantages. Once Ling discovered how well this strategy worked, she used it in every possible context.

Using Current Experience or Feedback to Adjust Strategies

Except for Julie, whose first extensive writing experience during the term was a history midterm, all the other participants had the good

fortune to be assigned a short, relatively easy writing task early in the term for the courses under investigation. The feedback on these first and later assignments helped guide their work. This strategy included not only feedback on their own work but the feedback that in one way or another they noticed their NES classmates receiving from the teacher, either publicly and orally in class or on their written assignments, which several of the participants managed to surreptitiously gain access to (by looking over shoulders and across aisles).

Looking for Models

Jien pointedly sought out models for her work, assiduously hunting for examples of successfully completed tasks similar to what she imagined was being asked of her. In one sense, relying on past writing experiences and possibly using feedback are forms of looking for models but this category is distinctive in that Jien looked to real world models of English language book reviews, movie reviews, and professional review articles as sources to actively imitate in their formats, organizational styles, and even wordings. Because such models were not provided in any of the courses examined in this study, Jien, as well as the others, was faced with the problem not only of finding such models herself but also of determining their appropriacy, which, in fact, she misjudged.

Using Current or Past ESL Writing Training

In the many hours of transcribed interviews with the 5 study participants, only one example emerged of a reference specifically to something learned in an ESL class or an ESL writing class. In China, Yang had had an English class with a U.S. professor who taught the students to brainstorm and to feel free in their writing to experiment with new words and expressions. Although both Jien and Ling were enrolled in an ESL class during the time this research took place, and although Ling thoroughly enjoyed her ESL class, even depended on it for comfort and friendly group interaction in an otherwise demanding and impersonal new environment, neither ever mentioned using anything from their English classes in any of the work they were doing across the curriculum.⁴ Julie enrolled in an ESL writing class (as required by

⁴It is striking that with a TOEFL score of 627, Jien should have been required to enroll in an English class on the basis of her low scores on the university's English placement exam. The explanation probably lies in the fact that Jien's TOEFL score was outdated. She had been out of school for 4 years, caring for her child while her husband studied, and had perhaps lost some of her facility with English in the interim.

her placement exam scores) but dropped after 2 weeks because she did not feel she was learning anything new.

Accommodating Teachers' Demands

This category was used to group two types of experiences. In the first, participants either did not understand the purpose of the teachers' requirements, yet attempted to meet them as best they could, often only superficially. In the second, Jien in particular reproduced in written statements what she gauged to be her teachers' positions, purposely suppressing her own opinions about language teaching because she recognized that they contradicted those of the teacher.

Resisting Teachers' Demands

This strategy took several forms, in Tula's case a quite dramatic one. All the forms of resistance were consciously undertaken and the participants expressed their awareness that they were doing something that the professor might not sanction. In general, the participants resisted assignments in one of three ways. The mildest form of resistance occurred when a writer consciously slighted part of the full writing assignment because of lack of either personal interest in or knowledge about the assignment as fully specified. Stronger resistance was embodied in consciously ignoring criteria which professors gave, specifically to Ling in this case, beyond the instructions about the assignment given to the whole class. Finally, in its strongest form, which we see exemplified in Tula's work, the resistance undermined the entire purpose of the assignment. One form of resistance that might be expected from students is failure to do an assigned task at all. This never occurred among any of the participants in this study during the term.⁵

An alternative interpretation of the data might argue that in fact these students were not resisting demands so much as doing their best to meet demands within the range of what they deemed themselves capable. Although such a perspective is plausible, I am nevertheless persuaded to see the participants' noncompliance as resistance (a) because it was, in each case, consciously embraced despite full and clear awareness that the choice did not reflect the professor's intentions; (b) because to greater and lesser degrees each of the resisting students felt resistance would benefit them more than compliance and therefore

⁵Their unjaded willingness to try to meet the requirements for the course may be what makes teaching first term students and international students so appealing to many faculty members.

they acted in pursuit of their own best interests, placing them above the professors' requirement in importance; and (c) because each example of resistance was, at least in part, based on a reasonable principle. Tula, for example, perceived her choice as more logical (refusing to pretend to speak like a stutterer); Julie saw hers as more interesting to her personally (focusing on the single most interesting woman in the novel); and Ling found hers to be a more efficient use of her time (relying on her personal experience as a Chinese person to help her complete her writing assignments). Each case represented an assertion of power, an attempt to exert control over one's own fate.

Managing Competing Demands

Not surprisingly, one of the most frequently spoken words in the interviews was *time*. All study participants were acutely aware of the need to juggle the various loads they carried in order to carry out their responsibilities in the time allotted. The participants in this study experienced five types of competing demands, ranging from the broad demands of their personal lives to the narrowest issues related to specific writing tasks. These are (a) managing course loads; (b) managing the work load for a specific course; (c) regulating the amount of investment made in a specific assignment; (d) regulating cognitive load; and (e) managing the demands of life.

Managing course loads. Most of the participants in this study consciously limited the number of courses they enrolled in during the term. Although as an English teacher trained in China, Jien had already taken courses in both English and teaching methodology, she had not been in school for several years. Because, in addition to the new burdens of student life, her personal life placed quite heavy demands on her, she enrolled only in an ESL course and a foreign language teaching methods course during the term. Both Julie and Tula kept a careful eye on the amount of work they were being asked to do in the full course loads they had taken on and had in mind which courses they intended to drop if they experienced excessive work pressures. They quite consciously intended to benefit from their stay in the U.S. beyond the offerings of formal education and expressed perfect willingness to adjust their course work loads around their felt need to travel in the U.S. and to socialize to whatever extent that became available. Julie joined the university's rowing club, not only to meet people but to get a more well-rounded educational experience by including physical education in her program. Only Ling did as so many first term international students seem to do and took a full course load, fully determined to complete them all and, whenever necessary, to sacrifice sleep to

fulfill the demands of each. Unlike for Julie and Tula, for Ling travel and socializing needs would only be accommodated after class demands were adequately met.

Managing work load. This manipulation consisted primarily of consciously not doing work that might have permitted, for example, a better understanding, or sometimes even a basic understanding, of the course material (rereading an assignment or reading over notes from a previous lecture) or that might have led to an improved paper (asking another student to look over a paper). Yang asserted that he was unlikely to ask someone to read over his paper before turning it in because it would take too much of his time and that of his classmate; furthermore, no classmate had ever asked him to read his/her paper over, for which he was grateful, not wanting to take the time. Because he had shared his writing regularly with classmates in another educational setting where each student prepared a part of the assignment and thereby spared the other students the work of doing the whole assignment themselves, Yang's reluctance to read his classmates' work and show his to them cannot be motivated merely by shyness but seemed rather to be at least to some degree an effort to save time. For several of these students, pacing and working far ahead of the class schedule also served as a means of managing the work load so that no work would ever require immediate attention.

Regulating the amount of investment made in a specific assignment. Although similar to the decision making required in managing work load, this manipulation differs in that the decision about the amount of investment to make in an assignment is primarily internally driven and private rather than driven by external measures of covering required course material. An example of high investment behavior would be Jien's decisions to write five pages instead of the assigned two in a writing assignment or to recopy pages by hand over and over until they looked perfect. Yang, on the other hand, displayed low investment in several assignments, regularly speaking of purposely selecting topics for his political science papers that he considered easy, such as the debates over international monitoring of human rights violations. (For an examination of investment strategies of NES students, see Nelson & Hayes, 1988.)

Regulating cognitive load. Several participants mentioned strategies they used to give themselves an added advantage in their work: sitting in the front in all classes; not taking notes during a lecture in order to concentrate fully on understanding the lecture; reading ahead in the course syllabus so that class lectures serve to reiterate information

rather than constituting the first encounter with the information; re-reading notes from the previous lecture in order to understand the upcoming one. On a much more microlevel, the participants spoke in particular of attempting to manipulate the cognitive demands of writing for their disciplinary courses by, for example, deferring attention to grammatical issues until they had generated the ideas in their texts to their own satisfaction.⁶ Yang described his fairly heavy use of direct quotations in his written work as motivated by the fact that it is easier to copy someone else's words than to paraphrase a statement in his own words.

Managing the demands of life. Although most of the data gathered for this study was related to writing in disciplinary courses, the demands of these participants' lives often emerged in their interviews. For example, in addition to taking two courses and participating in this study, Jien taught Chinese to students at the university during the week and to a group of young children on Saturdays. She was the primary keeper of her household and caretaker of her 3-year-old daughter, her husband being a PhD student to whose career Jien had at least temporarily sacrificed her own. However tough or light the demands of personal life may be, they are relentless, sometimes requiring abandonment of all other concerns; thus, the work we look at when examining a students' writing necessarily comes embedded within the context of a full and variously satisfying human life.

DISCUSSION AND CLASSROOM IMPLICATIONS

Several aspects of the experiences of this group of international students are particularly encouraging.

1. These students came to their studies in the U.S. with a battery of well elaborated strategies for dealing with the work they would face here. They consistently showed themselves to be resourceful, attentive to their environment, and creative and flexible in their response to new demands.
2. Nearly all the students were given relatively short, easy writing tasks in their courses across the curriculum early in the term. This allowed them to get at least a few experiences under the belt in their new setting before tackling bigger assignments. Because the feedback from these assignments was positive in each of the cases examined

⁶Because none of the participants mentioned ever having learned to delay concerns about grammar in this way, it is possible that this is a strategy the students came upon naturally on their own.

here (with the single possible exception of Jien's first article review), these students were able to experience early successes with writing in their disciplinary courses.

3. These students were able to use feedback (both to their own work and to the work of other students) to enable them to shift strategies when necessary. A repertory of responses to tasks is ineffective without the ability to shift among them.

Other aspects of these students' experiences were more ominous. Based on the grades these students collected at the end of their first term, our conclusion can only be that the students successfully met the expectations of their professors across the disciplines. However, these grades mask the toll taken from at least one of the students. Ling was unfailingly hardworking and optimistic, but in nearly each of our interviews in the fall she would comment, "Everything so rush; I feel pressure; I feel rush." Ling did not return to classes in the spring, citing massive fatigue from her heavy academic work load as the reason.⁷

Similarly, whereas resisting teachers' demands worked quite well as a strategy for these students, we might, as teachers, be left somewhat uncomfortable with the realization of how little faculty across the curriculum are aware of what really takes place among their/our students. Tula's fabrication of her stuttering paper data was only one fairly striking example of the professor's being in the dark. Ling's obvious lack of preparation for a writing assignment on who in the U.S. drinks Buds remained hidden from her professor, obscured by her ultimate success in completing the assignment. Other equally disturbing examples of the failure for these students of, for example, group work are reported elsewhere (Leki, 1993). In these cases as well, the professors had no indication of anything amiss, and yet from the students' point of view the experiences varied from meaningless and a waste of time to actively destructive. Perhaps even more interesting are cases like that reported by Nelson (1990) in which neither the professor nor the student was aware that they were working at cross purposes, each one representing the assigned writing task differently in their minds. In a more positive light, however, although faculty may often be unaware of how students approach and carry out assignments, the students in

⁷Ling did return to an old strategy, however. She said she would spend the spring semester studying on her own at the library, reading the textbooks for the courses she hoped to take the following fall. Although she asserted that what would help her most in meeting the demands of her courses would be more contact with NES students in her classes, she was clearly further isolating herself by deciding to work alone at the library. At the end of the spring term, she received word from Taipei that because of the sudden illness of one of her co-workers, her employer would require her return to Taiwan, and she left the U.S.

this study nevertheless did successfully ferret out their own paths toward completion of their work.

When the participants in this study resisted the demands of the assignment, they did so consciously because they recognized that they could not or did not want to do the assignment as they knew the professor intended. In some cases, they sensed that they could do a better job on the assignment if they rewrote it to suit their own interests (e.g., Julie writing only about one woman rather than about all the women in the novel for her history class) or abilities (e.g., Ling using Taiwanese/Chinese culture as a baseline for comparisons). In Tula's case, part of her resistance was prompted by deeper, more psychological reasons; she could not bear to expose herself in the way required by the assignment. This example recalls the reluctance of some students to write on English class topics that demand a high degree of personal disclosure. Thus, when students resist an assignment, we may need to make specific efforts to determine the cause of the resistance. As noted above, none of these students resisted by refusing to do an assignment at all or by turning in assignments late, another possible form of (sometimes unconscious) resistance.

These students' failure to refer to anything they might have learned in their ESL classes also merits commentary. Viewed from a positive perspective, it is possible that whatever these students had learned and were applying from their ESL training had become automatic and therefore invisible to them, integrated seamlessly into their normal writing behaviors. Clearly, this was the case at the level of language, possibly at the rhetorical level as well, because the students' professors never complained that these students' rhetorical approaches were in any way disturbing. Nevertheless it is potentially worrisome that the three students initially enrolled in ESL classes at the beginning of the term never referred to links between what they did there and what they were required to do in their other courses.

At the human level, Ling's experiences in her ESL classes were extremely positive; the class was a haven for her. From the point of view of personal vindication, Jien's experiences too were positive, as she was able to prove to herself and to her teacher that she was the best student in the class. Perhaps if she had not dropped her ESL course, Julie would eventually have found additional support there (although she never seemed to need it) for her writing across the curriculum. But the question of how writing courses, ESL and NES, appropriately articulate with the rest of the curriculum is one that remains thorny.

Although it might be argued that several of the strategies these students displayed are fairly obvious and that, confronted with a writing assignment, most students might naturally engage in clarifying

and focusing strategies such as consulting with teachers and classmates or rereading and even writing out the writing prompt, other of the strategies are less obvious and perhaps worthy of bringing to the conscious awareness of ESL students newly embarking on an experience with U.S. higher education. As in most human endeavors, in attempting to deal with new writing challenges, these students tended to harken back to past writing successes.

In many ESL writing classes, teachers purposely structure writing assignments for success. But to be meaningful, the success must come from overcoming a serious and challenging obstacle. The disciplinary writing assignments faced by the participants in this study fully engaged them intellectually. If writing successes in English classes come too easily, these may be insufficiently challenging to serve the purpose of giving students writing experiences they can later refer back to in attempting to address tasks across the curriculum. Although ESL class should no doubt be psychologically nurturing places, surely being a safe refuge is not enough.

Looking for models also seems to be a strategy that students might come upon naturally. In several instances during this study, professors provided quite extensive models. Julie's history professor spent the day before the first exam not only reviewing course material but also writing out on the board an outline of his version of a properly constructed essay exam answer, complete with thesis statement, topic sentences, body paragraphs with several examples, and concluding paragraph. On the other hand, in other instances when the students were left entirely to their own devices in determining how to do an assignment, they expressed a longing for models as examples. The use of models, specifically rhetorical models, in teaching writing has, of course, been widespread in both ESL and NES instruction, though it currently seems in relative disfavor. One of the problems with rhetorical models in writing classes is that those models are, naturally, course specific (i.e., specific to the writing class), and despite claims that they represent good writing, they are quite unlikely to be the models for specific assignments across the curriculum that these students seek, the history professor's outline on the board notwithstanding. Herrington and Cadman (1991) suggest that teachers in general need to find a balance between giving students too much structure by asking them to imitate models and giving students too little structure by providing no models for students to consult. The students in this study sought out models for their disciplinary assignments, intuitively perceiving them as beneficial. For writing classes, perhaps the real issue is not so much whether or not models should be used but rather what kind of models are useful. Many ESL writing professionals have come to shun formal, rhetorical models in teaching writing; like their

NES colleagues, they have sensed that adherence to models did little to promote intellectual engagement with the content of the writing. Perhaps we need to think instead of functional, task models, that is, rather than consistently assigning English-class essays, also giving ESL writing students the opportunity to experience and to grapple with such tasks as taking an essay exam or conducting and reporting on a survey. The importance for students of such assignments lies not in learning the correct forms for writing an essay exam or writing up survey results but in having at least one experience with going about such tasks to draw upon later.

In addition to providing successful experiences in writing in English, ESL classes can address other strategies. We might ask students to actively recall other writing successes of the past and to consider the factors in the experience which might have been responsible for the success and might also be recreated in the present. ESL classes might also encourage students to consider feedback not only as evaluative but also as formative, as suggestive of the need (or not) for a change in approach. We might warn students that a danger inherent in imitating models for writing assignments when the model is not provided by the professor in the course is the potential inappropriacy of the model, that the appropriacy of a model ought to perhaps be verified with the professor. And ESL classes can perhaps be the site of discussion on how to manage competing and insistent demands made on students.

Less obvious and more interesting strategies employed by the participants in this study were taking advantage of first language/culture, accommodating teachers' demands, and resisting teachers' demands. The most pressed student of the group, Ling was the only one to use the strategy of relying on her first language and culture to give her a step up in her efforts. Her discovery of the value of her experience as a Taiwanese may have been what allowed her to make it through the term as well as she did; it effectively cut her work nearly in half as she repeatedly compared new information (e.g., how people shop in the U.S.) to what she already knew. It is possible that she experienced a simple stroke of luck that the courses in which she was enrolled lent themselves to the angle she took. And it may not be wise for students to overuse such a strategy. Nevertheless, adding this approach to a broader arsenal of strategies might give students greater options.

The question of accommodating versus resisting teachers' requirements is an issue of balance. When Tula, like Sperling and Freedman's (1987) Good Girl superficially changes her text to bring it to conformity with her professor's expectations without understanding the rationale for those expectations, she is apparently making a mistake, losing an opportunity for a deeper understanding of her specialty area. However, it is difficult to justify an argument that would have Tula expend

more energy on deciphering her professor's intent when she is rewarded for her superficial compliance. It is also likely that many of the requirements made of ESL students in their first encounters with U.S. higher education are mysterious to them (writing/typing on only one side of a page, having a cover page on an assignment, the whole system of referencing and citation), require fairly strict compliance, and are not worth pondering. In sum, the temptation is to encourage ESL students to find out the rationale behind requirements; in practice, perhaps some things are better left alone.

Resisting teachers' demands is the strategy most fraught with dangers and yet possibly most useful. None of the participants in this study who used this strategy suffered for it. Yet, both ESL and NES students cite meeting the requirements of the assignment as one of the most important factors in doing well in a writing task in a disciplinary area (Leki, 1995). Most of us have also heard anecdotal accounts of professors who will not accept assignments which violate the smallest of the requirements stated in the assignment. Although in some cases wisdom might dictate that students check with their professors about proposed alterations of the professor's parameters, it is also possible that saying nothing and doing part of the assignment well, or doing a rewritten version of the assignment well, that is, in effect rewriting the assignment to suit one's own taste and talents, is a better idea than struggling to meet all criteria and not doing as well. To judge by the experience of the participants in this study, the faculty investigated here was for the most part less concerned with the terms of the assignment than with the quality of the attempt to meet those terms.

CONCLUSION

The research reported here explores strategies these ESL students used to successfully complete writing tasks across the curriculum. Aside from the preliminary cataloguing of strategies that this research suggests, what seems interesting from a pedagogical perspective is the degree to which at least some ESL students come to their studies at U.S. universities with a variety of already very well developed strategies for coping with their assignments. Furthermore, all 5 students were able to alter their strategies and pursue new ones when their first attempts did not produce the desired results. Some of these students were more conscious of their strategies than others and some took a bit longer to shift to alternative strategies when necessary, but they were all flexible and fairly richly endowed with ideas about what to do.

Qualitative research studies of ESL students in their writing across

the curriculum seem to show that writing demands vary considerably from one discipline to the next and even from one course to the next within disciplines (Prior, 1992). In EAP courses which work to prepare ESL students for their future encounters with writing assignments across the curriculum, it would seem wise to consider discussing strategies that successful students or anyone might use in approaching writing tasks. Given how well developed the strategies of the participants in this study were, however, it would also seem important to build from what students already know and not attempt to teach them something they already do. What does seem reasonable is to consult with students to learn what strategies they already consciously use, help them bring to consciousness others that they may use and not be aware of using, and perhaps suggest yet others that they had not thought of before.

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