

Understanding the Role of Reading in Source-Based Writing

Julie Haun

Portland State University

One important responsibility of ESL instructors in university settings is to guide their students to go beyond writing based on personal experience to writing that requires them to interpret, analyze and synthesize information from a variety of sources for use in their writing (Pearson Casanave, 1995; Carson, 1993; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Jones, 2001, Heyden, 2001; Pally, 2000; Powell & Ponder, 2001). To meet this need, ESL programs often require students to complete a course in research writing.

The first class I taught in academic writing was typical of those offered in many ESL programs. The students entered my class with a background in writing essays based on personal experience and opinion as well as some experience writing personal responses to short articles. In my class, students were expected to select a topic, locate relevant sources from the library and then write an eight to ten page paper using the sources to support the thesis they had developed. Together, we toiled away on this task for the entire term.

I taught research writing this way for several years. Each term, a handful of students would thrive. A much larger percentage struggled and all but failed as they went through the lonely process of identifying an appropriate topic, trying to find useful yet manageable sources, and then figuring out what to do with all the information contained in all those sources. It was clear that an intermediate step was necessary: something that would allow them to experience the process of using sources to build their essays without the added complexity of having to locate, understand, and use those sources on their own (Powell and Ponder, 2001). I developed a writing assignment that

used readings I had selected, based on a theme of my choosing. To create this intermediate step, I needed to rethink my strongly held belief that in order for writing to be meaningful to students, they need to write about subjects of their own choosing.

What I discovered, as this approach to the research writing process evolved from a single assignment to an entire course, was that working as a group to read and write about a common topic over the course of six to ten weeks can actually be exciting, useful, and less intimidating for students.

I have also discovered that by asking our students to jump from personal essay writing to individual research projects we miss an important opportunity to help students understand and develop their role as readers in the writing process. In her article "Reading for writing: Cognitive perspectives," Joan Carson (1993, p. 85) writes

A handful of students would thrive. A much larger percentage struggled and all but failed

Reading and writing are equally important in the process of a literacy event in which the most significant product is not the writing per se, but the meaning that has been created by the reader/writer from both comprehending and composing texts.

When the student's first experience in source-based writing is the independent research project, the reading process is primarily a private act. Yet, *how* students read their sources and interact with the ideas in those sources is vital to their success as writers.

My colleague Nancy Dollahite and I have developed an approach to introducing source-based

writing through guided research papers. These are short (three to five pages) papers based on information from three to six articles, selected by the teacher, on a common theme. The guided research paper enables students, as a learning community, to experience how writing from sources is a process of transforming knowledge for use in their own writing. The first stage of the writing process, when students read and acquire information from sources for use in their writing, is broken down into three steps: *exploring*, *focusing* and *organizing*. Each of these steps plays an important role in facilitating the students' conceptual understanding of themselves as active readers in the writing process.

Exploring

Students begin the writing process by exploring a topic. I select a theme and three to five readings that provide a variety of perspectives. The readings range from one to five pages in length and are drawn from magazines, books, university texts and web sites. Once we have completed a short discussion activity to introduce the theme, I give students one of the articles to read as homework and ask them to highlight any ideas that capture their interest as they read. When we next meet, we discuss the article together. Each student selects and reads aloud one of their highlighted passages. They explain what they think the passage means, share the reason for their interest, and consider why the author included the idea in the article.

As students talk, I listen, paraphrase their ideas, ask questions if I don't understand or want more information, and point out connections between the ideas students are discussing. This process, which can take the entire class period, is repeated for each article. As students become more comfortable with the process and familiar with the issues associated with the topic, they begin to make their own connections between the ideas of their classmates and the authors we are reading.

Often as a follow up to the discussion, I ask students to write a written response to one or two ideas of their choosing from an article. These re-

sponses include a paraphrase of the idea(s) they have selected and an explanation of why they think this idea is important or interesting. I never begin a discussion by asking students to identify the author's thesis and supporting points, nor do I assign any type of comprehension questions. Sometimes, after we have discussed an article, I may ask students to write a summary of the article, but often I don't.

Students regularly select and discuss sentences that represent key points the author is making. If they don't, it doesn't worry me, as long as their understanding of the ideas they select is accurate, and they are establishing a connection to the reading and discussing issues related to our topic. After several years of using this strategy for learning about a topic, I still find myself pleased and excited by the fact that these discussions yield such useful and interesting information about the students, about the topic, and about the material we are reading.

they begin to make their own connections between the ideas of their classmates and the authors we are reading.

What do students learn during this exploratory stage? First, students are building a knowledge base and context for their writing. As students read, discuss and write responses to the articles, they are acquiring and beginning to

articulate the ideas they will use to write their paper (Carson, 2000; Leki, 1993; Powell and Ponder, 2001). Goldstein and Conrad (1990) found in their research on advanced ESL writing that students are often not able to provide sufficient and appropriate support in their writing because they do not have enough content knowledge to fully develop their topic. Simply exploring the writing topic in an open, reader-based manner is the first step toward encouraging students to become active readers absorbing and analyzing information related to their topic.

In his article "Reflecting on commentary: Mind, intellect, and a use of language," Rudolph Bernard (2000) writes that in order for students to read and write about a topic, they must be intellectually engaged. He argues that the best method for achieving this engagement is by having the students, rather than the teacher, initiate the points of discussion within an article. Sustained interest in a topic, he points out, comes from allowing students to develop their own pathway to understanding the ideas in an

article and to thinking about the topic in a more general manner.

In addition to providing an opportunity for students to develop a personal interest in the topic, these exploratory discussions spark a communal interest that enriches the topic. By discussing the articles as a group, the class develops what Powell and Ponder (2001) call a “collective curiosity” about the topic. As students contribute their interpretations of and reactions to the ideas in the text, they add to the collective understanding of the topic. Thus, they create a far richer understanding of the material than a single student could bring to the reading. Students also begin to listen to each other and offer their own ideas more easily when they realize the goal is simply to explore the issues (Bailey, 2000; Blanton, 1993; Johns, 1993).

A further advantage of the reader-based approach of the exploration stage is that the momentum created as students become more actively engaged in the topic makes it possible to assign more complex readings than students might be willing to tackle if they were reading the material on their own (Bernard, 2000; Blanton, 1993). Reading texts that offer more depth and complexity can translate later into more substantive material for the students to include in their writing.

The third benefit of this exploratory stage is subtle, powerful, and absolutely essential for helping students develop as writers. Students begin to see themselves as builders of knowledge rather than simply summarizers and paraphrasers of other people’s ideas. Blanton (1993, p. 235) writes that “students need to move away from seeing the text as a self-contained document where everything to know about the text lies on the page in black and white. As Leki (1993) notes:

Writing teachers, in their effort to help students unlock the meaning of a reading, often rely on comprehension questions or summarizing activities that end up contributing to students’ misperception that the purpose of reading is to “ferret out the meaning the author put there (p. 17)

*these exploratory discussions
spark a communal interest
that enriches the topic*

When students do not understand their role in assigning meaning to text, they are severely handicapped when they sit down to write an essay that requires them to analyze, synthesize and transform information for use in their own writing.

With repeated opportunities to choose the points to discuss in a reading and how to respond to those ideas, students learn that their interpretation of a text is significant and has value. During my class discussions, I begin on the first day by talking about the students’ and the author’s ideas on equal terms. For example, I might say, “So, Kazue, you’re saying ‘X’ which I notice is similar to what Smith (the author) is saying here in paragraph 4. Or, “it sounds like several of you disagree with Smith’s point about Y, but your reasons for disagreeing are different.”

At the end of a discussion, or as a summary of a discussion in a previous class, I might say “In our discussion, there seemed to be four key ideas that interested the group. As we move on to discuss the next article, let’s see what, if anything, Douglas has to say about these ideas.” These four key ideas may be related to the author’s thesis, or they may be ideas that grew out of the discussion of passages that were not central points in the article. The point is that students see their ideas combining with those of the authors they are reading to form a collaborative portrait of their writing topic.

Focusing

The second step in the writing process is to narrow the writing focus to one specific aspect of our topic. We begin this by developing a research question. The research question is an important tool that guides students as they read their sources, as well as providing a clear focus for students as they write drafts of their paper later in the writing process. For at least the first paper of the term, the entire class typically uses the same research question. The students may work together to develop this question or the teacher may develop one, being mindful of the ideas students seemed most interested in during their exploratory discussions.

For example, in a class exploring globalization, the teacher had tentatively developed the following research question: How is globalization affecting the

environment? However, after completing the open readings of the sources, the teacher changed the research question to more closely reflect the interests of her students: How is globalization affecting worldwide health?

When students work from the same research question, it makes class-wide discussions more meaningful, facilitates in-class activities and, as the writing process evolves, offers students a powerful lesson in voice as they see the many ways their classmates choose to answer the research question. The papers students generated from the research question on globalization and health varied widely. They included, among other topics, globalization and fast food, globalization and women's health care, and globalization and changing medical training.

Once the research question is established, students are ready to complete what we call a *focused reading*. Using the research question as a focusing tool, students reread each source, highlighting any information that might be useful in answering their question. We suggest to students that they read quickly without pausing to analyze each passage before they decide whether or not to highlight it. Once they have reread all their sources, they can return to each piece of highlighted information to develop a deeper understanding of its meaning. In addition to highlighting the information, the students may also make separate notes of these passages.

In small groups, students discuss the information they have highlighted and how they think it is related to the research question. As students share their focused reading notes, they may decide to add or delete from their own notes based on the comments of their classmates, or they may remain steadfast in their particular vision of how the passages they have selected relate to the research question.

As with exploring, the first step in the writing process, this second step, focusing, helps develop vital concepts about reading for students. First, students begin to see that sources serve different functions at different stages of the writing process. During the exploration stage, students read texts to develop a basic understanding of the issues related to

a topic and to consider their own reactions to those ideas. In this second step, students are reading the same sources in order to find information that might help answer a question.

Students see that their purpose for reading greatly influences how they read an article. For example, during the focused reading, students may skip entire chunks of an article that are not relevant to their question. In her article "Teaching writing IS teaching reading," Barbara Kroll (1993, p. 69) comments:

writers must understand that the 'purposes' for reading also vary from reading event to reading event; different purposes will lead to very different ways in which students undertake and accomplish the reading tasks.

When students complete their focused reading, they notice that some articles contain many highlights while others may have only one or two relevant pieces of information. As this occurs students begin to understand

that they can move away from the robotic approach to reading in which they incorrectly believe that the only way to read any piece of writing is to go through the entire text, line by line, word by word (Carson, 1993; Leki, 1993; Pally, 2000). Grasping this concept can go a long way toward reducing the intimidation and panic students feel when faced with a stack of reading material.

In addition to understanding that their purpose for reading will influence how they read a text, students also learn that it is their own writing task that dictates what information within a reading is useful or relevant and which is not. When working with students on source-based writing, I look forward to the moment when this conceptual light bulb goes on. Students move beyond the paralyzing belief that they can only use an idea from a source if it matches the author's use of that idea. Spivey (1990) notes:

readers who are reading to write attend selectively to content that may be relevant to their own written text, even though that content may not be what is emphasized in the [original] text itself.

students begin to see that sources serve different functions at different stages of the writing process

This is a continuation of the concept, introduced during the exploring stage, that the student plays a significant and active role in assigning meaning to a text as it is read. In order to successfully analyze and synthesize information from sources, students must be given permission to transform the passages contained in an article for their own use (Bailey, 2000; Carson, 1993; Flower, 1990, Leki, 1993; Spivey, 1990).

This concept is highlighted when students see that their classmates may select entirely different passages during the focused reading to help answer the same research question. A single passage will have different values for each person who reads it, as well as changing in value as a single student reads and rereads material, each time adding to the knowledge structure they bring to the reading process and thus altering the meaning of text. Once students have completed a focused reading of each article, developed a set of reading notes, and discussed their notes with their classmates, they are ready for the next step in the writing process.

Organizing

This third stage of the writing process involves sorting and organizing the information students have gathered from their sources. By this time, the students have read each source at least twice. They have also created a set of notes from their focused reading that they feel will help them answer the research question. Now they need to figure out how the information in their notes is related. In other words, they need to analyze and synthesize this information so that it forms a cohesive outline of ideas. While there are several ways to accomplish this, this article will describe just one method that we call *brainstorming a list*. This method has two steps: brainstorming and categorizing. The two steps are usually completed in one class period.

First, at the beginning of class, students quickly review their notes and then set them aside. In small groups, students brainstorm any ideas they have that answer the research question. These ideas are written as words and short phrases. As students are working together, their ideas contribute to and inspire the ideas of others. Once they have generated a written list of ideas, they are ready to begin the

second part of the process. In this step, students read through their list and, as a group, begin numbering all similar items on the list with the same number. Students begin by numbering the first idea on the list as number one. They move to the second idea and discuss whether it is related to or different from the first idea and number it appropriately as either one or two. They continue down the list until they have discussed and numbered all the ideas.

For example, Table 1 below shows a list that was developed and then numbered by students answering the research question “What makes a successful city?”

As students work through this process they will find themselves explaining what they feel each idea means and why one idea belongs or does not belong with another idea. They will discover, among other things, that not all the ideas on the list fall into a category. These ideas students can cross off their list. They discover that some ideas work better if they are broken up into two ideas or if two ideas are combined

into one. Once the list is numbered, students then describe or name each category. In the example of successful cities, students described the three categories as follows:

#1 Strong social structure

#2 Solid economy

#3 Good physical and cultural environment

Students complete the entire sorting process without looking at the readings or even their notes. In fact, in the several years that I have used this method for synthesizing notes, students have never asked to look at their sources or notes. While the process can feel chaotic or messy when students first begin, the sense of ownership students feel regarding the information and how they have organized it is powerful. Groups share with each other the categories they have developed and take notes as they listen to the very different ways students have thought about the information. I tell them they are welcome to either use one of the organizing frameworks developed in class or to repeat the process at home and come up with their own rough outline of ideas to answer their research question.

In this stage of the writing process, students move into viewing the information from sources as

A single passage will have different values for each person who reads it

part of their own knowledge base. Carson (1993, p. 96) writes that “critical literacy occurs when a person not only understands information but transforms it for a new purpose.” This occurs when students are able to knowledgeably discuss with their classmates their writing topics, such as what makes people take risks, not because they’ve read an article on the causes of risk-taking, but because they’ve read articles on the topic of risk, discussed ideas with their classmates, considered their own knowledge and, from all of this, generated a list of possible reasons.

Further evidence that students have transformed the information from their sources into their own knowledge base is their ability to discuss these ideas without referring directly to the articles. In these first three stages of the writing process, students have had opportunities to discuss the idea from the readings using their own words. Each time they do so, their understanding of the ideas becomes stronger and their ability to articulate them grows. By the time students write their first draft, their struggle to paraphrase ideas is considerably lessened. Rather than the teacher extracting specific sentences from the articles for students to practice paraphrasing, the process of paraphrasing is embedded in the context of exploring, focusing and organizing ideas.

paraphrasing is embedded in the context of exploring, focusing and organizing ideas

Conclusion

To summarize, students begin the writing process by exploring, as a group, the ideas in each of their sources in an open, reader-based manner. Students not only begin to acquire information for use in their writing, but they also begin to see their own ideas and their reactions to the ideas in the readings as significant. By working as a group to share and explore ideas, they enrich the topic and increase their willingness and ability to understand complex read-

ings. In the focusing step, students use a research question to guide their second reading of the sources. In this stage, they begin to recognize that their role as writers influences how they read a text and what information within a text is relevant. Finally, in the organizing step, students begin to analyze and synthesize the information from their sources into a rough outline. It is at this stage that students transform source information for their own use and begin to recognize their control over the information they have acquired from their reading.

Once students complete the first three steps of the writing process, they are ready to develop their thesis and write the first draft of their essay. As writing teachers, we are eager to get on with the actual writing and so, it is easy to gloss over these initial steps –foisting much of the work involved in reading sources onto the students as solitary assignments to be completed as homework. The writing teacher may tell her students that they “have a week to read their sources and develop a thesis statement.” Or, in an effort to efficiently move students through the source material, teachers may assign sets of comprehension questions for each reading and then provide short periods for students to discuss their answers with each other.

I have come to believe; however, that how students learn to interact with their sources greatly influences their perception of themselves as critical thinkers, readers and writers. As writing teachers, we play an important role in facilitating this powerful conceptual understanding.

Notes

1 See Tony Silva’s 1997 article, “On the ethical treatment of ESL writers” and Nathan Jones (2001) article “Why assign themes and topics to teach

writing? A reply to Tony Silva,” for discussion on student choice in selecting writing topics.

Table 1

1- strong neighborhoods	3-attractive urban design	3-major league sports team
2- good economy	3- cultural amenities	3- arts community
1- volunteerism	1-affordable housing	2- safe
3- interesting places to go	3- good air and water quality	1- strong sense of self
1- good schools	3- natural beauty	3- dynamism
2- diverse industry	2- flexibility	2- variety of people
1- active citizens	3- easy to get around	1- good colleges

References

- Bailey, N. (2000). E pluribus unum. In M. Pally (Ed.), *Sustained Content Teaching in Academic ESL/EFL: A Practical Approach* (pp. 179-191). Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company.
- Bernard, R. (2000). Reflecting on commentary: Mind, intellect and a use of language. In M. Pally (Ed.), *Sustained Content Teaching in Academic ESL/EFL: A Practical Approach* (pp. 200-209). Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company.
- Blanton, L. (1993). Reading as performance: Reframing the function of reading. In J. Carson & I. Leki (Eds.), *Reading in the Composition Classroom: Second Language Perspectives* (pp. 234-247). Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.
- Blanton, L. & Kroll, B. (Eds.). (2002). *ESL Composition Tales*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Carson, J. (1993). Reading for writing: Cognitive perspectives. In J. Carson & I. Leki (Eds.), *Reading in the Composition Classroom: Second Language Perspectives* (pp. 85-99). Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.
- Carson, J. (2000). Reading and writing for academic purposes. In M. Pally (Ed.), *Sustained Content Teaching in Academic ESL/EFL: A Practical Approach* (pp. 19-27). Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company.
- Flower, L. (1990). Introduction: Studying cognition in context. In L. Flower, V. Stein, J. Ackerman, M.J. Krantz, R. McCormick, & W. Peck (Eds.), *Reading to Write: Exploring a Cognitive and Social Process* (pp. 3-32). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Goldstein, M. & Conrad, S. (1990, Fall). Student input and negotiation of meaning in ESL writing conferences. *TESOL Quarterly*, 24(3), 443.
- Grabe, W. & Kaplan, R. (1996). *Theory and Practice of Writing: An Applied Linguistic Approach*. New York: Longman.
- Heyden, T. (2001, Winter). Using sustained content-based learning to promote advanced ESL writing. *TESOL Journal* 10(4), 16.
- Johns, A. (1993). Reading and writing tasks for academic purposes: Products, processes, and resources. In J. Carson & I. Leki (Eds.), *Reading in the Composition Classroom: Second Language Perspectives* (pp. 274-285). Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.
- Jones, N. (2001, December 14). Why assign themes and topics to teach writing? A reply to Tony Silva. A paper presented at the International Language in Education Conference: Hong Kong Institute of Education, New Territories, Hong Kong.
- Kroll, B. (1993). Teaching writing is teaching reading: Training the new teacher of ESL composition. In J. Carson & I. Leki (Eds.), *Reading in the Composition Classroom: Second Language Perspectives* (pp. 61-81). Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.
- Leki, I. (1993). Reciprocal themes in ESL reading and writing. In J. Carson & I. Leki (Eds.), *Reading in the Composition Classroom: Second Language Perspectives* (pp. 9-25). Boston: Heinle and Heinle Publishers.
- Pally, M. (2000). Sustaining interest: Advancing learning. In M. Pally (Ed.), *Sustained Content Teaching in Academic ESL/EFL: A Practical Approach* (pp. 1-13). Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company.
- Pearson Casanave, C. (1995). Local interactions: Constructing contexts for composing in a graduate sociology program. In D. Belcher & G. Braine (Eds.), *Academic Writing in a Second Language: Essays on Research and Pedagogy* (pp. 83-95). Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Company.
- Powell, B. & Ponder, B. (2001, Autumn). Sourcebooks in a sustained-content curriculum. *TESOL Journal* 10(2-3) 13.
- Silva, T. (1997, Summer). On the ethical treatment of ESL writers. *TESOL Quarterly*, 31(2), 359.
- Spivey, N. (1990, April). Transforming texts: Constructive processes in reading and writing. *Written Communication*, 7(2), 256.
- Julie Haun is an instructor in the Intensive English Language Program at Portland State University. She has been teaching ESL for 14 years.*



Pass the word to your friends about becoming an ORTESOL member!

Benefits of individual membership include:

- the ORTESOL Newsletter (four issues a year)
- ORTESOL Journal (one a year)
- Membership Directory and Handbook
- annual ORTESOL conference advance notice and registration form
- funding for regional workshops
- access to TESOL and ORTESOL conference and travel grants
- special interest group membership
- advocacy efforts for the TESOL profession and ESOL students in Oregon

Membership in ORTESOL does NOT include TESOL membership.

Institutional members are entitled to the same benefits as individual members, plus:

- one designated person at the institution receives a personal membership included in the institutional membership
- the institution can send visiting foreign scholars to ORTESOL conferences, free of charge, with prior approval of the Conference Coordinator
- a link to the institution's web page from the ORTESOL web page will be established.

For more details, see the ORTESOL website: <http://www.ortesol.org>