A study is described which investigated the differences between English-as-a-second-language (ESL) writers and native-English-speaking writers and examined closely a range of ESL writers and their composing processes. The procedures used were those used by Sondra Perl in a study of the composing processes of unskilled college writers (1979). Subjects were four students in a remedial ESL program and four non-natives who were taking or had completed a freshman composition course. The students had varied linguistic backgrounds. The data were drawn from taped interviews about the students' educational and writing backgrounds; proficiency tests in grammar, vocabulary, and reading; think-aloud composing on two topics; interviews after each composing session; and assessment of writing samples by trained evaluators. Some common patterns emerged from the analysis: the ESL students wrote more than Perl's theorized basicwriter and edited less, with the lowest-proficiency students editing very little. The proficient group's editing focused on punctuation and verb forms. The non-remedial students wrote more fluently and revised more than the others, but one low-proficiency non-remedial student was found to write very well. The overall conclusions were that no neat definition of the ESL writer emerged, the profile of the unskilled ESL writer is extremely complex, and opportunity for oral rehearsal may be valuable in skill development.
AN INVESTIGATION OF HOW ESL STUDENTS WRITE

Ann Raimes

INTRODUCTION: L2 STUDIES

In the last five years there has been an increase in the amount of research and theoretical inquiry devoted to the process of composing in a second language. Influenced by the research in L1, researchers have shifted their attention from product to process. And they have found out quite a lot. Jones, for example, looked at the planning done by 6 Venezueian graduate students in Spanish and in English, and found that they did not have good planning skills in L1 or in L2 (1983). Analyzing data from the study of the same 6 students, Jones and Tetroe (1985) and Tetroe and Jones (1983, 1984) found that the quality of planning transferred, though not the quantity; the better planners were better revisers in both L1 and L2; and for all the writers there was less revising in L2. They even went so far as to conclude that "second language composing is not a different animal from first language composing" (Jones and Tetroe 1984). Both they and Edelsky (1982) and Lay (1982;1983) have noted that knowledge of L1 writing strategies forms a basis for making new hypotheses in L2 writing (Tetroe and
Extensive work on how student writers revise in both English and Spanish is now being done by Gaskill (1984).

A few researchers have looked at L1 vs. L2 composing, not just as done by one and the same student but across populations; they have compared data on L2 composing with the data available on L1 composing from studies such as those by Perl (1978, 1979), Pianko (1979), and Sommers (1980). Jones (1982) looked at the pause times of 7 ESL writers as they composed and found that discourse features affected his L2 writers in much the same way as they did Matsuhashi's L1 writers (1981). Zamel has used interviews and observation of advanced ESL students and has noted strategies similar to those that native speakers use (1982;1983). Heuring, from videotapes of 5 students of various skill levels as they wrote essays, again deduced similarities: like native speakers, the unskilled ESL writers focused on local concerns and did not revise efficiently; the more skilled ESL writers behaved more like the skilled L1 writers in that they paused less at the sentence level but read over large chunks of their essays (1984).

Now Krashen deplores the fact that "studies of second language writing are sadly lacking" (1984: ). But we have seen that isn't so. The lack isn't the amount of research.
The problem lies rather with the lack of large samples and the lack of variety of the research questions asked. The studies I described just now focused on—and tended to find—similarities between L1 and L2 composing. And with that shift from product to process in theory and research, and with those findings, a similar shift made its appearance in teaching too. Teachers began to say that ESL writers needed the same type of "process" teaching as L1 writers. Now this worried me. Of course, in ESL we needed to be shocked away from all our teaching of grammar which masqueraded as teaching writing. We needed to be blasted into questioning all our sentence drills and controlled compositions. And we needed desperately to attend to process. But I was worried about going too far and focusing the whole time on similarities with native speakers.

In various courses and workshops I have taught I have asked participants to write in L1 and L2. Each time, it has been clear that the process of writing in L2 is not only different from writing in L1 but startlingly different. So we needed now, I thought, to adopt a new approach and ask: What sets ESL writers apart from native speakers? What makes them different? And, equally important, a political question for ESL professionals arises as a corollary: why does a writing class for ESL students need a trained ESL teacher and not just a writing teacher?
In an effort to explore these questions I set up two projects to look at differences between ESL and L1 writers and to examine closely a range of ESL writers and their composing processes. In order to have the basis of comparison with native speakers, I decided to use the same procedures that had been used by Sondra Perl in her study of the composing processes of unskilled college writers (1979).

BACKGROUND

I began my exploration in Spring 1983 with a classroom study. A full report of that study will appear in the June TESOL Quarterly, so I will report on it only briefly here. I took my remedial class of ESL students at Hunter College and asked them to compose aloud on a given assignment in the language lab, while I taped what they said as they composed aloud. Composing aloud means saying everything that is in your head aloud: as you write, you say the words; as you read, you say what you are reading; as you think, you say what you are thinking. You are not asked to analyze and explain. In the paper that reports this project, I have included a long explanation and justification for using composing aloud with ESL students, so I won't take time with that now. Once I had the tapes, I listened to them and used Perl's coding scheme to code the activities minute by minute on a time line, obtaining an 84% rate of agreement with
another coder. By using Perl's scheme, I could make comparisons with the five basic writers whose activities she analyzed, and particularly with the one basic writer, Tony, whom she examined in detail (1979). If you look at p. 3-4 of your handout, you'll see exactly what that involved and what it looked like: here you have what Chih-Hwa actually wrote (IV), what she said as she wrote (III) and how I coded that composing aloud (I). [Run through what it means.] From such coding, we can count the numbers of times activities occur, and we can see patterns of composing emerge. Many of the coding sheets, for instance, are much fuller, much more packed with activities than others. Some show a clear flow of writing from one sentence to the next; another will show long gaps and lots of activities between sentences. All that can be coded and analyzed. But obviously, even after we have some idea of what the writers actually do, we can still only speculate about why they do it that way, and indeed whether they only do it that way when they are composing aloud. But given all that, these were some of the findings that emerged:

1. the students wrote more than Perl's basic writer Tony and they wrote with commitment;

2. the act of writing, however recursive and retrospective, served to generate language, even for the students with a low level of language proficiency;
3. they paid less attention to errors and editing than Perl's subjects and certainly less than I had expected;

4. their wide range of language proficiency scores did not correspond to assessed skill in writing, since they were all in the same writing class; nor did language score correspond with the number of years the students had lived in the U.S. Johnny had lived here 11 years, scored 80, yet the quality of his writing was evaluated 6th out of the 8 students I looked at in detail, just above that of Jose, who had lived here 13 years and scored only 54;

5. a specified audience and purpose in a topic appeared to make very little difference: they seemed to see only the teacher as the reader, and also, often quite productively, as the listener in the think aloud process. One student, Bo-Wen seemed to be regarding me as the listener/audience as he talked out his ideas. He chatted, explained, even chuckled. But then he put all that aside as he wrote for a reader. His content lost its flair and interest and dullness set in as it hit the page;

6. what emerged chiefly from the analysis of the data was the conclusion that it is impossible to talk about the ESL writer as one clearly definable type to whom we can gear instruction, like the basic writer. Furthermore, it's not even possible or useful to talk about the unskilled ESL writer. No one clear profile of an unskilled ESL writer

6
7. All through this preliminary study I found evidence for the value of think aloud composing as a tool for teaching writing and for the value of writing itself as a tool for teaching a new language.

RATIONALE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

My second study was funded by a PSC-CUNY Research Award. Now I had help. I could do more. So I decided to look at a wider range of students, those judged both as less skilled and as more skilled in a sequence of college courses to see if their behaviors changed as skill levels changed. My research questions were these:

1. Are there any behaviors common to all the ESL writers, across course levels?

2. In what ways are the behaviors similar to or different from those observed by Perl?

3. Are there any differences between the composing behaviors of students in remedial or non-remedial courses?

4. Are there differences between the composing behaviors of students with a high language proficiency score and a low?

Other questions that the data can help explore—but which I have not yet analyzed for—are these:

- How does the specification of audience and purpose
affect the composing behaviors of ESL students? 

- Are there differences in behaviors of ESL writers of different nationalities?
and - of male and female students?

SUBJECTS

[First, the subjects.] I selected 4 students from our remedial ESL composition program (pre-Freshman composition) and 4 who were taking or had successfully completed Freshman composition. In each group of four there were 2 men and 2 women. Also, in each group, the L1 of two students was Spanish, of one student it was Chinese, and the fourth student spoke some other native language (in this case, it was Farsi and Haitian Creole).

PROCEDURES

For all the students, I followed these procedures:

1. I interviewed them about their educational and writing background and taped the interview;

2. I gave them an ESL language proficiency test (the grammar, vocabulary, and reading sections of the Michigan Test);

3. I taped their think-aloud composing on 2 assigned topics—both of them untimed: one topic with explicit
purpose and audience (me), the other a typical school-sponsored agree/disagree topic;

4. I taped an interview with them after each composing session;

5. I had their written products evaluated by trained evaluators.

CODING AND ANALYSIS

The composing tapes were transcribed and coded according to a slightly modified version of the scheme Perl used with her basic writers (1978, 1981). From coding sheets, a large variety of quantitative analyses can be performed so that comparisons with Perl's data are possible. Samples of some of the data analysis sheets I developed are in your handout, pp. 5-6. P5. shows a summary chart for each essay topic: the data for all eight students were tabulated here and on a separate sheet you have those data for the first essay composing session. [Go over and explain.] You'll see on p. 6 the activities I coded for in each writing session, and I have 16 of these sheets. Perl's and my coding for textual changes (revision and editing) is less sophisticated than Faigley and Witte's categories that Gaskill is using. Perl has only 2 categories, revising (changes affecting meaning) and editing (surface form changes).
SELECTED FINDINGS [mention that work is in progress and feedback is appreciated]

Common behaviors for all students on both tasks

Planning

There was very little articulated planning i.e. working out what to do in the piece of writing. In fact, for all 8 students in their 16 assignments, only 85 instances of planning occurred, an average of 5.3 planning operations per session. But Perl's Tony, the writer she reports on in detail in her 1979 article, in one assignment had 32 instances of general and global planning. So he attempted to plan more than the remedial ESL students in my first study, who had a total of 17 planning operations, and he planned more than this group of writers, too. What stood out was that the written products of the writer, Dominique, with the highest number of articulated planning operations--14 in each task--were ranked 6th out of the eight students. So here more planning, at least articulated planning, did not have any direct correlation with assessed quality.

Time spent and number of words produced

The total time spent on an assignment (presented as open-ended) ranged from 23 to 76 minutes. The number of words produced in the final draft in that time ranged from 216 to 703. Tony's total composing time in his first session was
91.2 minutes, more than any of my ESL writers spent. Yet the
final draft of the essay he produced in that time contained
only 170 words. So here was a native speaker of English with
more time, and more planning, yet less output than writers
struggling with a second language on top of everything else!
Explanations of these findings can at this point only be
speculative: one speculation here could be that an unskilled
native speaker writer has almost by definition a lack of
familiarity with writing in any language and sees error as
stigmatizing, so much so that the act of writing becomes
slow and painful, with the writer deliberately avoiding
risks. And as he sees each sentence as a risk, not much gets
said. ESL writers, on the other hand, do not appear to be so
intimidated. Perhaps because they know they are language
learners; they know they use the language imperfectly. They
expect the teacher to correct it. They keep on writing,
letting one sentence generate the next, getting words and
ideas to produce more words and ideas.

Prewriting
The time the students spent on pre-writing (before writing
sentence 1) ranged from 2 to 11 minutes, with the average
being 4.7 minutes. The most common behavior during pre-
writing was rehearsing, trying out actual ideas, sentences,
and phrases that might be put down on paper. Tony, in
contrast, spent most of his pre-writing time on planning (10 times) and reading the assigned topic (10 times), almost avoiding dealing directly and intimately with the assigned subject matter. These ESL writers plunged in more immediately with generating ideas.

Revising and editing

The total number of revising and editing changes that these eight students made in their 16 assignments was 447, with 245 of those (55%) being changes affecting content (i.e. not just surface changes). In my first study I had noted with surprise that the students, all in a remedial course, did less editing than Perl's basic writers. I was interested to see whether this pattern would hold across ESL writers at different levels in their writing courses. It did. These students made 202 editing changes across sessions, an average of 13 changes per session. Perl's writers made an average of 28 changes per session. I looked at where the ESL writers made these changes, whether while writing a sentence, between sentences or while reading over a passage or a draft. The majority of both editing and revising changes were made during the writing of sentences (57%). For the most part, then, editing and revising took place during the working out of an idea and not as a clean-up operation—and certainly not as a separate stage in a linear process.
Clarifying an idea as it emerged appeared to be the main motive for making changes in the text, not just the production of a grammatically accurate text.

With respect to common patterns, then, what I had observed in my first study was borne out in the second: the ESL students wrote more than Perl's basic writer in less time, and they edited less. And the three students with the lowest language proficiency scores (in the 60s and not in the 80s) edited considerably less than most of the other students. They did not seem to be "distracted by local problems" (Zamel 1983:174), as was Zamel's one student designated as "unskilled" even though she was in a course after two semesters of freshman composition. These writers went back a lot to read but did not seem to be looking for what to fix but rather for a way to find their voice and to move on. I wonder, then, if our students begin by concentrating on meaning, but by the time they get to upper levels of writing courses, are either so much more aware of the language they are using or are so influenced by our teaching that they too, like Tony, see error as a stigma and spend more time on search and destroy missions. And only after they become truly proficient writers (like Zamel's skilled writers) can they break from that bondage and return to what they began with—a search for expressing meaning.
Behaviors for students with high and low language proficiency scores

The students' scores on the language proficiency test did not correspond with their placement within the course sequence. In the non-remedial group, 3 of the students scored above 80; but one scored 67. In the remedial group, 2 scored 65 and 69 while the other two scored 80+. For the 5 students with the 80+ high score, one feature stands out, and that feature was surprising to me: in both writing sessions, the proficient group—regardless of course placement—did more editing, and that editing focused quite noticeably on punctuation and verb forms.

It was of interest, too, that the two students who did very little editing were the two with the highest and the lowest proficiency score and whose writing was evaluated as being the best and the worst. Level of language proficiency thus did not seem to determine a student's behavior with regard to editing.

Behaviors of the non-remedial and the remedial group

And what set off the non-remedial group from the remedial? Three things in particular: The non-remedial students wrote more fluently, in that sentences were written with fewer interrupting activities and one sentence followed directly after the previous sentence more often than with
the remedial group; not surprisingly, they revised more; but quite surprisingly they edited more, too, making more spelling and verb form changes. In general, too the non-remedial students were more active as writers: they revised and edited more, they engaged in consistently more activities between sentences, particularly rehearsing and reading back. (i.e. looking forwards and looking backwards).

The one student in the non-remedial group with the low proficiency score of 67, Giovanna, was able to write essays that readers evaluated as one of the two best in the whole group. What was she doing, I wondered, to compensate for this lack of language proficiency? (Her score was particularly low in the vocabulary section of the test.) An analysis of her protocol showed that Giovanna planned and rehearsed more than anyone else. In one assignment, she rehearsed what she was going to put on paper 31 times while writing sentences and 22 times between sentences, far more than any of the others in the non-remedial group. Could it be this rehearsing, then, that makes a difference? When I think of Bo-Wen and the creativity and productivity of his rehearsal while composing aloud, I know that I want now to examine rehearsing more closely: in research and in my classroom teaching. We have tended to put emphasis on prewriting via freewriting or formal sets of heuristics, or on revising, and the feedback and conferencing with our
students that goes along with that. But all of this concentrates on what the writer sets down on paper. Shirley Brice Heath reminded us at TESOL last year that thinking and writing are not separate, that emphasis should be on talking out ideas and talking during the process, not necessarily talking about the product. James Britton, too, points to the fact that in speech, we shape as we utter (1983). In writing, too, as we rehearse our words for the page, those words are a stimulus for continuing to write, and not primarily for rewriting (Britton 1983: 15).

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Reporting on the data is the easy part. It's the speculating about causes and about implications where it all gets fuzzy. However, I can say this: Again, while some patterns emerged, there were enough anomalies for us to say that no neat definition of either the ESL writer or of the unskilled ESL writer emerged. From the behaviors observed, from the range of language proficiency scores in both the remedial and the non-remedial group, from what the students said in the background interviews about their experiences with writing in L1 and L2 and from what they said in the interview after each writing session, it became clear that what makes up the profile of the unskilled ESL writer is extremely complex. I am working on a chart that provides for
a formative evaluation of skill in writing in L2, according to the variables that have emerged in these two studies (see handout, p.2). Obviously, the variety of profiles possible here within a class or within a group of students with a similar language proficiency level shows us that a rigid and prescriptive design for instruction in an ESL writing class could be at best random, helping only a few students, or at worst, non-productive or even damaging.

So, yes, trained ESL professionals are needed in an ESL writing course to assess the various categories of skill, to tie all this in with the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic factors for each student, and to devise instruction appropriate to all the students' needs: cultural, informational, rhetorical, and linguistic instruction.

For what sets ESL students apart is the variety of their backgrounds, and the variety of their processes and their needs. The findings here suggest that it is the opportunity for verbal rehearsal that is especially beneficial—and rehearsal with a real listener or a real reader. The good thing is that it is beneficial not only to writing but to language learning generally. For what are students doing when they rehearse but trying out language to communicate something that they generate? I'm suggesting here that writing classes should not be as silent as some of
the classes I've seen, with everyone writing away, and maybe the teacher conferring in a corner with a student. Instead, the valuable class time should be used for talking: talking to rehearse ideas, to rehearse vocabulary, to rehearse sentences. And then more talking in the form of readers'reactions and discussions of what readers expect in terms of content, form, style, and accuracy.

As with my first study, this study too showed the value of composing aloud as a tool for teaching writing. And, more than anything, it showed the value of writing as a tool for language teaching. In ESL teaching, writing has often been relegated to the status of one of the 4 skills, and often the least useful and the least important. As the subjects did in these studies, language students who are asked to write can talk, experiment, play with language, take time to find appropriate words and sentences, test out a text and change their minds, produce a great deal of source material for others in the class, and they are guaranteed a response from an audience. Where else in language teaching are such ideal language learning conditions found?
FORMATIVE EVALUATION OF ESL STUDENTS' WRITING SKILL

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<th>Skilled</th>
<th>Moderately Skilled</th>
<th>Unskilled</th>
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<td>Language proficiency</td>
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<td>Assessment of written product</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student's self-evaluation of writing in L1</td>
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<td>Student's self-evaluation of writing in L2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge of writing (through instruction, experience, reading)</td>
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<td>Writing behavior, compared to what we know about skilled writers</td>
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CODING COMPOSING-ALOUD TAPES

I. Coding for first 10 minutes of Chih-Hwa's think-aloud composing tape:

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<td>re re re W Rh</td>
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<td>re re re re R 4 re re Rh</td>
<td>re re Rh W RhreW</td>
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II. Commentary:

The numbered horizontal brackets show the number of the sentence being written. From the coding alone we can see, for example, that the writer moved from sentence one to two and from three to four with relative ease, going back only to read the sentence just written. After sentence four, her pace slowed down. She read everything she had written so far (R W), with some repetition of parts of a sentence that was troubling her. Then she re-read her last sentence, going back to the trouble spot again, before tackling the fifth sentence.

III. Transcription of tape of Chih-Hwa's first 10 minutes of composing aloud (underlined sections indicate when she was writing as she was talking):

... about that unexpected that happened to you ... thing that expected, expect, that happened to you. I can't think of now... mmm, many things happened in... many things happened unexpected in lives, many things happen unexpected-- in life ... What am I going to say? There is... care about this ... that happened to you ... There was, there were many things happened, un-expect--pected, --pected, there were many things happened unexpectedly, there were many things happened unexpectedly, in my life, many things that happened unexpected in my life.

The most remarkable, remarkable thing, was happened, the most remarkable thing happened.

RAIMES: Louder.
Louder, okay. The most remarkable thing happened when I was in junior high school. There were many things happened unexpectedly in my life. The most remarkable thing happened when I was in junior high school, ahm, ... when I was in junior high school. Mmm, there were many things happened unexpectedly in my life. The most remarkable thing happened when I was in junior high school, in junior high school, happened when I was in junior high school.

I was in my own country and just graduated from elementary school. I was interested in sports, especially baseball, especially baseball. When I, when I went to junior high school, my junior high school had many school teams, had many school teams.

IV. Chih-Hwa's written product (first ten minutes):
"Tell about something unexpected that happened to you."

There were many things happened unexpectedly in my life. The most remarkable thing happened when I was in junior high school. I was in my own country and just graduated from elementary school. I was interested in sports, especially baseball, especially baseball. My junior high school had many school teams.
AN INVESTIGATION OF HOW ESL STUDENTS WRITE

1. L2 studies of the composing process: Edelsky, Gaskill, Heuring, Jones, Jones and Tetroe, Lay, Pfingstae, Raimes, Tetroe and Jones, Zamel (see References)

2. Background to study, funded by PSC-CUNY Research Award

3. Rationale and research questions

4. Subjects: 8 students (4 remedial, 4 in freshman composition or above)
   In each group: 2 men, 2 women
   2 Spanish speakers, 1 Chinese, 1 other

5. Procedures:
   Interview
   Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency
   Think-aloud writing: topic with expressed purpose and audience
   Think-aloud writing: agree/disagree topic
   Interview after each writing session

6. Coding and analysis:
   Adapted from Perl's coding system (1979, 1981)
   Quantitative analysis and comparison with Perl's subjects (1978, 1979)

7. Selected findings
   Common behaviors for all students:
   planning
   time spent
   prewriting
   revising and editing
   Behaviors for students with high and low proficiency scores
   Behaviors of non-remedial and remedial group

8. Conclusions and implications
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<td>2. θ of sentences in each draft</td>
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<td>632 456</td>
<td>687 520</td>
<td>632 484</td>
<td>123 240</td>
<td>232 731</td>
<td>427 381</td>
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<td>3. θ of words in each draft: including deleted material final product</td>
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<td>557 444</td>
<td>532 440</td>
<td>57 107</td>
<td>216 703</td>
<td>384 356</td>
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<td>4. Total time spent (minutes)</td>
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<td>5. Time spent on each draft (minutes)</td>
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<td>6. Time spent pre-writing (before Sentence 1) (minutes)</td>
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<td>7. Time spent after last sentence (from RW) (minutes)</td>
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<td>8. # of times returns to read statement or question after first time</td>
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<td>9. # of sentences written fluently (no more than one s and/or re)</td>
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<td>16 25 33 2 2 4 17 2</td>
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<td>10. # of sentences written with no activities after previous sentence</td>
<td></td>
<td>10 26 42 8 2 14 27 4</td>
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<td>11. # of times gap between sentences is larger than 60 seconds</td>
<td></td>
<td>8 3 2 10 1 4 6 5</td>
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<td>12. # of sentences interrupted in writing to read back before the sentence</td>
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<td>0 1 0 2 0 4 5 1</td>
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<td>13. Total # of Revisions (RV's):</td>
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<td>15 15 24 28 10 18 19 7</td>
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<td>within sentences</td>
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<td>8 4 14 17 1 6 3 7</td>
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<td>between sentences</td>
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<td>5 3 3 6 0 0 0 0</td>
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<td>while reading over</td>
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<td>2 8 5 3 9 12 5 0</td>
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<td>14. Total # of Editing operations (E's):</td>
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<td>24 5 25 6 7 28 19 4</td>
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<td>within sentences</td>
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<td>15 1 12 1 5 19 12 4</td>
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<td>between sentences</td>
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<td>5 1 2 1 0 0 3 0</td>
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<td>while reading over</td>
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<td>4 2 11 4 2 9 3 0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Commenting</td>
<td>Rehearsing</td>
<td>Questioning</td>
<td>Assessing</td>
<td>Reading (sentences)</td>
<td>Reading the Statement</td>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>Unintelligible Remark</td>
<td>Repeating</td>
<td>Silence</td>
<td>Researcher Intervention</td>
<td>Editing</td>
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<td>1. Types of Revisions made</td>
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<td>2. Types of Editing operations made</td>
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<td>3. Behaviors while pre-writing</td>
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<td>4. Behaviors used between sentences; not at beginning or end of draft</td>
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<td>5. Most frequent behaviors between sentences</td>
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<td>6. Behaviors exhibited while writing sentences (not counting W's)</td>
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<td>7. Most frequent behaviors while writing sentences</td>
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<td>8. Behaviors while reading over</td>
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REFERENCES


Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency. 1962. Ann Arbor, Michigan: English Language Institute, University of Michigan.


