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Behind the Picture: Apprehension in the L2 Writing Process

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In our combined 43 years of teaching writing, we have observed that all writers, whether they have been taught to do so or not, work through an individual cognitive process on the road to producing a written document. Keenly aware of this, we try to help all students discover a strategic approach to their writing that will work for them. Most writing teachers do the same. In fact, directly teaching a strategic writing process has become a fairly influential model for first language composition programs (Benson & Heidish, 1995), and this model has decidedly trickled down into second language writing instruction (Raimes, 1996).

Although writing process models—as well as the degree of detail contained in them—differ somewhat, the strategic steps in most models include some variations of these tasks: inventing/exploring; planning/organizing; drafting; and revising/editing. (Spack, 1995; Leki, 1992; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Second language writing textbooks are often organized around a recognized writing process with emphasis on critical thinking and rhetorical patterns as well, resulting in what Reid (1993) has called the process/product approach to teaching writing.

We subscribe to the process/product approach of teaching writing. In working with our university non-native speakers, we have often reflected on our own writing strategies in an attempt to help our students find a process that will work for them—given that we also subscribe to the notion that no one size fits all. For example, one of us cleans furiously as one of her initial steps in the process of formulating ideas while the other works crossword puzzles while her ideas begin to take shape. One of us taps into her creative juices early in the morning, often arising at 4:00 a.m. to draft a manuscript while the other typically burns the midnight oil pounding away at her computer keys. We differ greatly on the early stages of the writing process but match up easily on the final stages of editing and revising.

We have researched the writing process as it is described in the literature, and we model it for our students by writing with them in class. We spend a great deal of time and energy on the initial steps, teaching students to generate ideas and to organize their thinking before they begin to write. We do this with even more vigor after having learned from one of our studies (Holmes & Moulton, 1994) that this first step is one that

creates the most anxiety for students. In that study, we worked with a class of advanced ESL writers, inviting them on the first day of class to cartoon the steps they would take in creating a composition from start to finish. Many of the cartoons depicted students with no clue of how to generate ideas. Several drew themselves in complete emotional turmoil, unable to come up with even one word of text (see Figure 1). This study opened our eyes to the emotional and cognitive difficulties students seemed to face. Now, some years later, we wondered if, after having almost completed all the required writing courses in the university's general education core, our second language writers had overcome the emotional difficulties associated with writing.

Figure 1

A Chinese Student Depicts Her Growing Anxiety Over Writing

The Study

To answer our question, we decided to investigate the writing processes of non-native students who were in the final week of their last semester of required writing instruction at the university. In our institution, students must place into the freshman writing program by receiving a 5.0 on the Test of Written English (ETS), or they may successfully complete an advanced ESL writing course. Following placement, students take two courses in composition and rhetoric; both are designed to teach critical thinking, academic writing, and research skills. The writing process underpins all writing instruction in our composition program, so we decided to examine the writing strategies of students who had completed a minimum of two but most likely three or four semesters of academic writing. Thus we would be assured that the students we investigated were thoroughly steeped in the writing process. At the minimum, then, the students had had one year's experience in using a writing process. Some had had far more.

The Assignment

Near the end of the second semester of freshman composition and rhetoric, we asked the students in three classes of second-year composition to draw the strategies they engaged in when asked to complete a writing assignment for English class. Apart from this request, no cues were given. Students were told not to fret about their art work as we were not interested in finding the next Picasso; we were only interested in looking at what they "id" when they needed to write for their English class. No limits were placed on their drawing. Students were given several sheets of sketching paper each and a weekend to complete their drawings.

The Students

Fifty of the sixty students enrolled in the three composition classes submitted drawings depicting their own strategies for writing an academic paper. The nationality of the students in the study was predominately Asian, with 39 out of the 50 representing various Asian nations: Japan (9), Korea (12), China (11), Philippines (3), Thailand (2), Indonesia (1), Nepal (1), and Taiwan (1). The remaining 13 students hailed from Oman, Russia, Italy, Sweden, Nigeria, Hungary, Morocco, Israel, and Poland. Thirty-four of the 50 students were female. The age of the participants ranged from 20 to 43, with a mean of 25. These two statistics—gender and age-reflect the norms for the university as a whole (Office of Institutional Analysis and Planning, 2002). More than half of the participants were seniors (26) while only four students were freshman. The rest of the students were divided between juniors (8) and sophomores (12) with one graduate student. This

is not the norm for the university as most native speakers take freshman composition during their first and second semesters.

What the Cartoons Showed

After collecting the drawings, we examined them, looking for themes that might reveal students' understanding of the writing process and their emotional responses toward writing. Using Strauss and Corbin's (1990) constant comparative method of data analysis, we discovered four themes related to the writing process, with the students' emotional responses coloring their actions and interpretations.

Finding a Topic

Half of the students—25 out of 50—showed no strategy for finding a topic. Somehow, an idea just arose as they depicted themselves beginning to write their papers. Many used multiple panels to describe themselves at a loss for an idea but, in the next panel, had finished the paper (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

A Japanese Senior's Paper Magically Appears Despite the Lack of an Idea

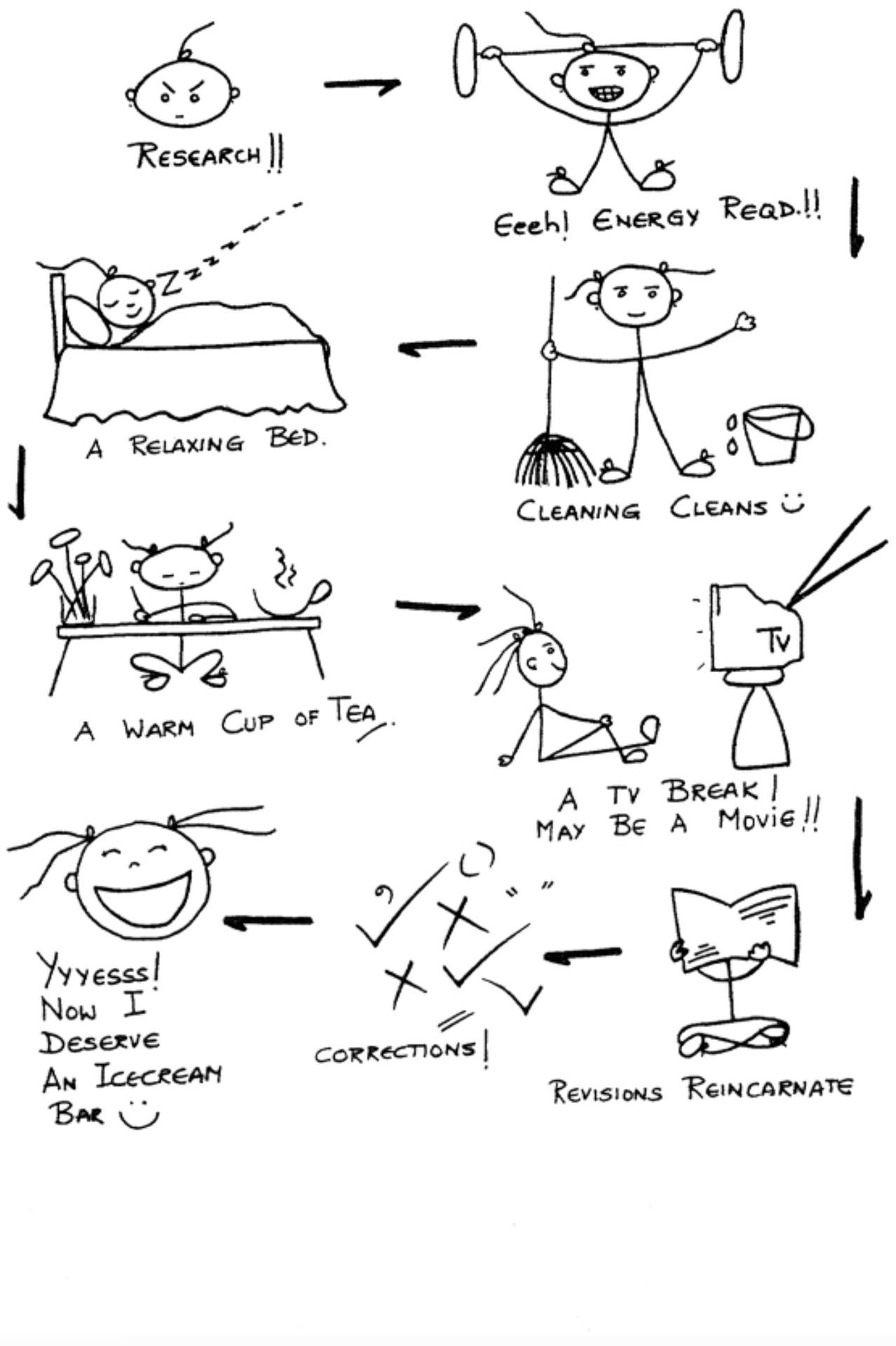
Almost 25% of the students depicted the use of the Internet as a means of finding a topic, but because the three classes focused on research-based writing, it was not totally clear whether the students were searching for ideas or for easily available sources. About 22% of the students showed themselves creating their idea from their own thoughts. Two of those students used the word "brainstorming" when trying to think of an idea. The remaining students found their ideas elsewhere: from the library, books, or newspapers; from television; and from talking with friends or family. Of the 25 students who depicted themselves struggling for ideas, 48% were seniors, 24% were juniors, 20% were sophomores, and 4% were freshman. The single graduate student also depicted himself searching vainly for an idea.

Getting Started

Over one-third of the students—18—showed no delay or procrastination but depicted themselves immediately beginning the assignment. The remaining students, however, showed various means of procrastination, delaying tactics, and avoidance (see Figure 3).

Figure 3

A Nepalese Senior Uses Multiple Tactics to Aid Writing His Paper



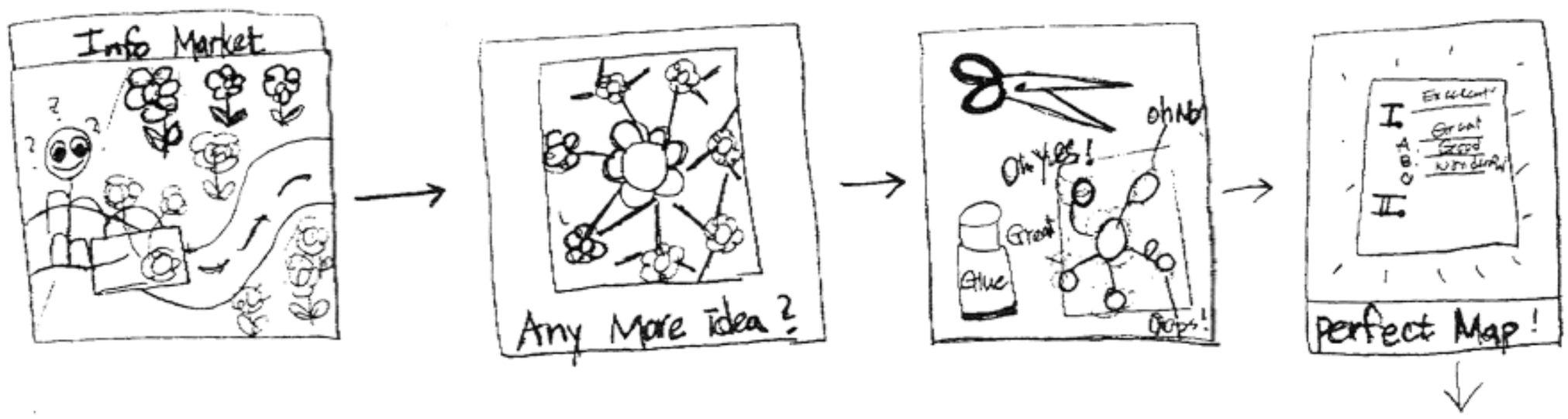
Eleven students showed themselves sleeping rather than writing. Eight students used food as a delaying tactic, sometimes as a need prior to writing, sometimes as a reward between steps of writing. Seven students watched television or movies while five students listened to music rather than write. Other students depicted themselves cleaning or doing laundry, exercising or walking a dog, taking a bath, going out with friends, shopping, paying bills, playing on the computer, and smoking…anything to avoid writing their papers. The number of methods of delay equaled far more than the number of students as many depicted multiple techniques for procrastination.

Organizing and Drafting the Paper

Only eight students—one freshman, one sophomore, one junior, and five seniors—made any reference to organizing their material. Four showed or referred to the "bubbles" of clustering, webbing, or semantic mapping; three referred to a "plan" or "main points;" and one showed both a cluster map first and then an outline (see Figure 4).

Figure 4

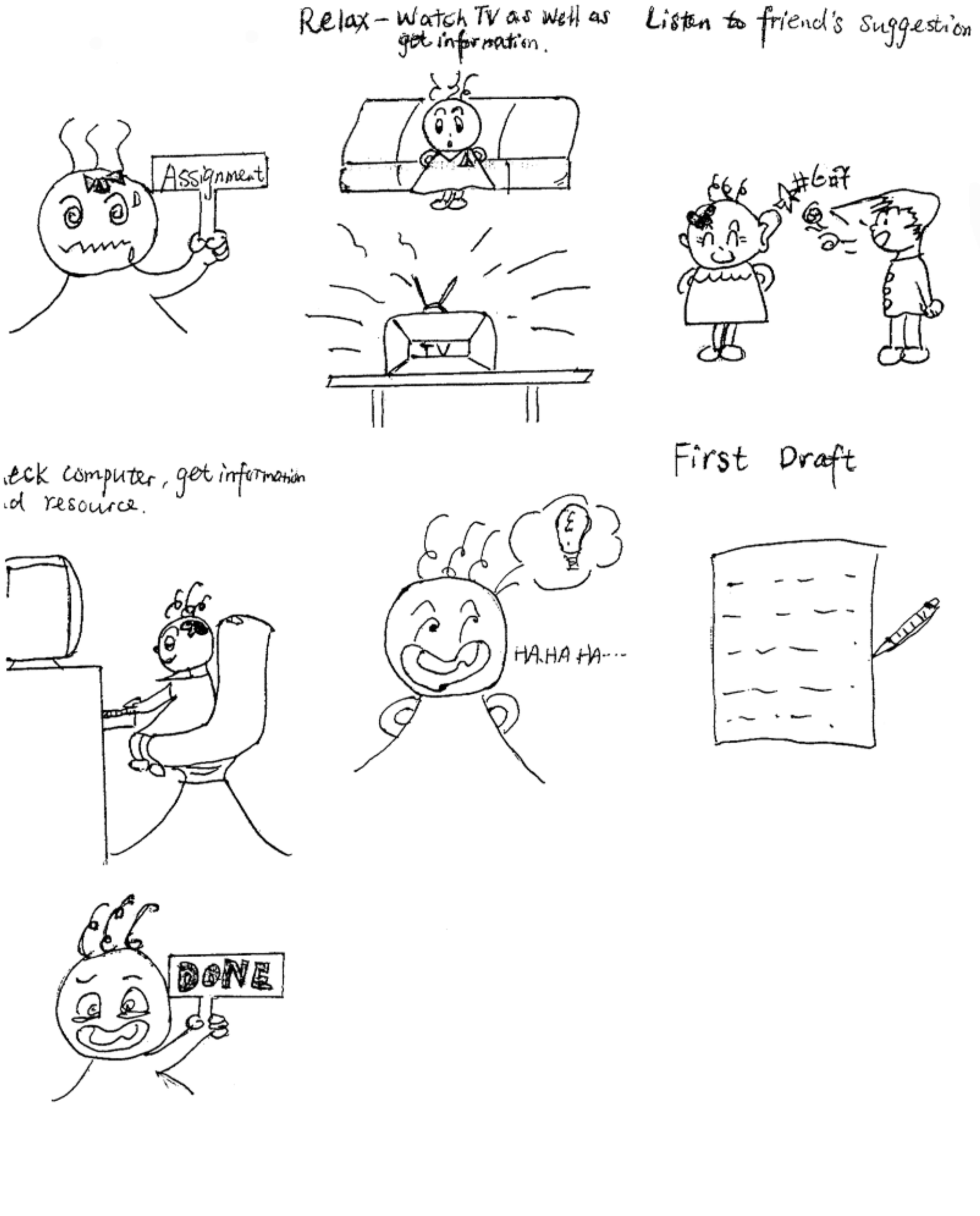
A Korean senior shows both clustering and outlining in her first few panels



The other students moved directly from their ideas either to drafts or finished papers (see Figure 5). For over half the students (26), the first draft was also the final draft.

Figure 5

A Chinese Junior Moves From First to Final Draft in One Step

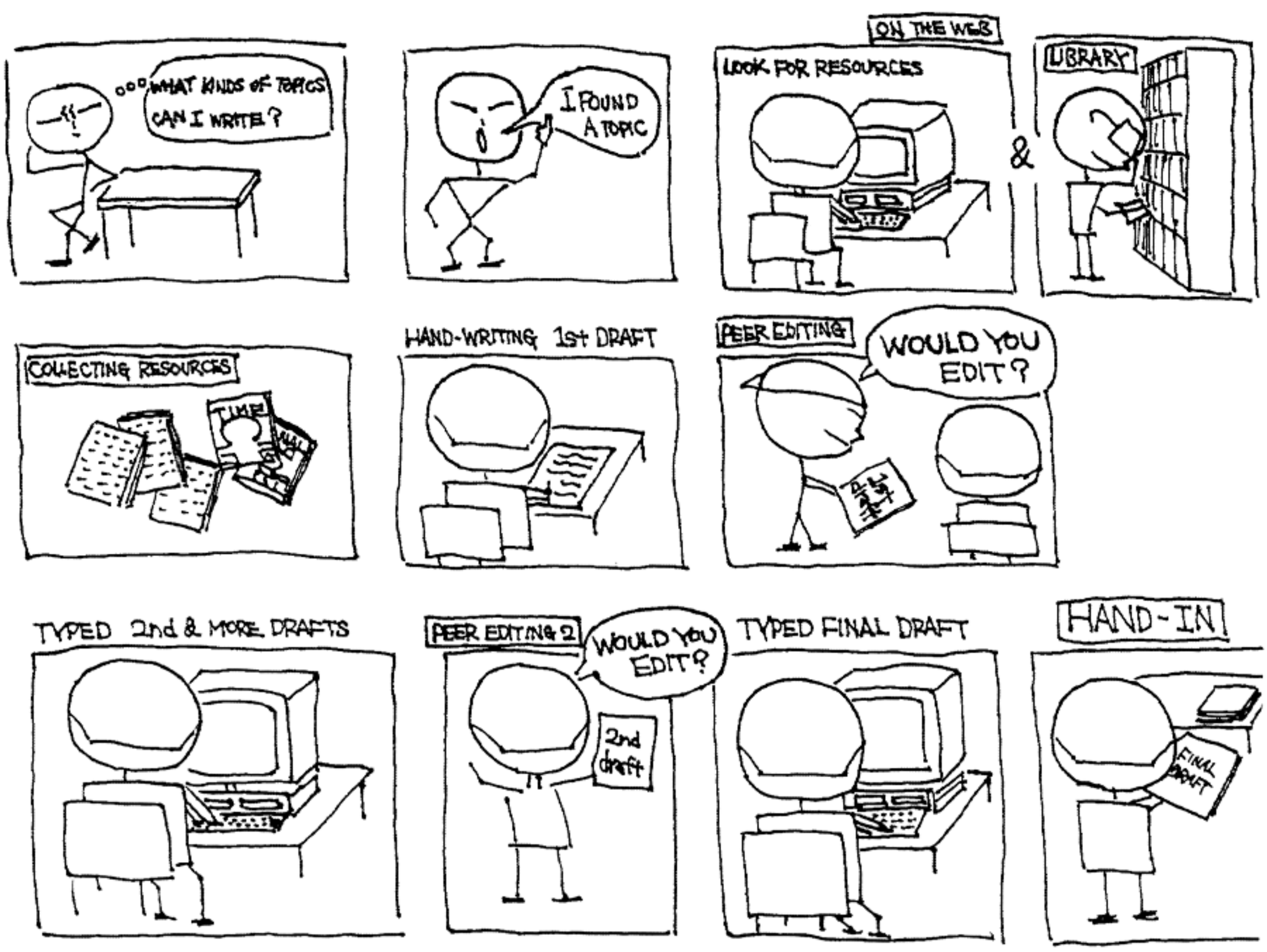


Revising and editing

Five students showed themselves editing, revising, or "fixing" their own work, though it was not clear whether there was any differentiation between revising and editing. Six students asked peers to help them revise and edit while three students went for help at the writing center. Ten other students showed themselves writing more than one draft of the paper (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

A Japanese sophomore revises and edits multiple drafts



Underlying Emotions

Many of the students depicted their emotions through universal symbols. Clocks or calendars were present in 26% of the students' cartoons, usually accompanied by text or lines that indicated their stress over the writing assignment. Stress also emerged in the middle of night for five students, who showed themselves lying in bed but unable to sleep because of the need to work on their papers. One student drew herself out of the situation by using insomnia as her essay topic while another chose to see it all as a bad dream. Still showing stress, another student sketched the assignment pursuing her while still another depicted himself being tossed into a deep well. Frustration over the assignment was also shown through the tears of one student and through angry smoke erupting from another student's head. Still another found herself eating but not enjoying the food because of the assignment hanging over her head. There were also verbal expressions of anxiety and frustration in nine cartoons. One student used swear words while another used symbols of swearing: "*#&?*!." Two students used the word

"difficult" while another called for "Help!" One student rebelled, asking, "Who cares?!" as another stated, "I don't wanna do it." One student drew his writing assignment as a punishment, with the teacher angrily yelling at him and raising a stick against him as the student cried, "I can't do it." Getting an idea or finishing the paper showed more positive emotional overtones.

Eighteen percent of the students used a light bulb and smiles to show their delight when an idea came to them. When the paper was finished, 38% depicted themselves as having big smiles on their faces. Though not necessarily smiling, several other students rewarded themselves upon completion, with a cigar for one, a walk in the moonlight with husband or boyfriend for another, and an ice cream cone for a third student. Relieved to be finished writing but not necessarily happy, four students depicted themselves as bleary-eyed, asleep, or exhausted when done (see Figure 7).

Figure 7

The Final Panels of Various Students Express Diverse Emotions at the Completion of Writing

What the Cartoons Implied

The delaying tactics of the students came as no surprise. Even seasoned writers engage in ritualistic behaviors to avoid facing the empty page as Reeves (1991) has already pointed out. What was a surprise, however, was the fact that the students depicted these tactics in such detail and diversity. In our earlier study of the cartoons of 18 advanced ESL writing students (Holmes & Moulton, 1994), few students showed any delaying tactics although most did show some form of writing apprehension. Yet almost two-thirds of the freshman composition students showed multiple means of procrastination. The prompt given did not encourage them to show non-writing behaviors; it merely stated, "Draw the steps you go through when you are asked to write a composition for this class." Why, then, did so many choose to include their delaying tactics as part of their composing strategies? Why did these students show more avoidance than the earlier students in a lower level of writing class? And how can such revelations assist the teacher?

Another surprise was the students' lack of ideas to write about. Despite the fact that this was a college freshman English class, 68% of the students were juniors and seniors already taking courses in their majors. Presumably, they had specific interests in their chosen fields and were mature enough to have opinions on many topics. Yet half of the students, including 48% of the seniors and 24% of the juniors, showed themselves struggling to find an idea. Perhaps students' past experiences in their own cultures' educational systems still influenced these students. For example, students from Asian cultures are used to writing assignments that are prescribed in style and content (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; McKay, 1989). Similarly, when Russian students are asked to write their own opinions, they are often hesitant to do so as their own culture does not encourage it (Benesch, 2001). Previous educational programming may be in such conflict with American educational expectations that students struggle more to overcome the conflict than to come up with an idea.

A third surprise was the small number of students (16%) who referred to any means of organizing their papers despite having been exposed to multiple strategies in their earlier ESL writing classes and the first semester of freshman composition. While they may have chosen not to depict strategies they used, the small number of students who showed themselves using organizing strategies indicates otherwise. Furthermore, all three of these elements-procrastination, having ideas, and organization-are all part of the pre-writing phase of the writing process. Is this part of the writing process made up of such alien concepts to international students that, despite being taught, it doesn't transfer easily between cultures?

Of more concern than the unexpected prominence of cartooned frames in which students featured themselves delaying and unable to come up with ideas or organize their papers is the undertone of negative emotions associated with writing an academic paper. In fully half of the drawings, students depicted themselves expressing some form of unproductive, negative emotion-be it a frown, a curse word, exhaustion, confusion, frustration, or defeatism. Since we did not follow up with interviews of the students in the study, we will never know completely the source of the anxiety students illustrated in their cartoons. Was it the pressure of time? Was it feelings of incompetence? Was it a "disconnect" with their own thinking processes? Was it some form of incongruence with the expectations of writing in their native cultures versus writing in the American academic setting? Or was it simply a dread that is universal to all writers?

What this study has clarified to us is that we, along with most other teachers with whom we associate, do not give enough attention to minimizing writing apprehension in L2 writers once those students leave our ESL classrooms and enter mainstream academic programs. We assume, perhaps wrongly, that students who "pass" their TOEFL and TWE tests are ready for "prime-time" academics and that because they have been steeped in the writing process they are no longer fearful of writing. The drawings of our second semester mainstream composition students show otherwise and suggest the need for further attention to writing anxiety issues in second language populations.

A review of the literature revealed to us that studies in second language writing anxiety began in the 1980s, which witnessed the seminal work of Rose (1980) and Gungle and Taylor (1989). These studies followed a more prevalent research strand involving the writing apprehension faced by native English speakers initiated by the development of the Daly-Miller Writing Apprehension Test (1975). At about the same time, the teaching of composition was shifting paradigms to focus on process rather than product (e.g., Emig, 1971). Perhaps the confluence of these two movements-the writing process and recognizing student writing anxiety-invited researchers to hypothesize that teaching students the stages of the writing process would mitigate students' fears. Many strategies suggested by researchers and practitioners in both L1 and L2 involved emphasizing the various stages of the writing process to help students overcome their reluctance to write.

While researchers have speculated on the many causes of anxiety that students experience when they write, two causes appear to be at the top of the list. One such cause is students' lack of writing skills (Holladay, 1981; Thompson, 1979). Students who perceive that their grammar and syntax are weak are often reluctant to put words on paper for fear of negative evaluation by teachers. One way for teachers to help students overcome this particular anxiety is to de-emphasize evaluation at the linguistic level and emphasize and nurture development at the content level (Calderonello & Edwards, 1986; Elbow, 1973,

1981; Murray, 1984). This is precisely what the writing process advocates-to write for content, not for sentence accuracy-on the first draft. Another suggestion made by both advocates of the writing process and researchers in writing anxiety is development of a workshop atmosphere (Elbow, 1981; Fox, 1980). Such a student-centered approach de-emphasizes teacher evaluation by making use of peer review from drafting to revising to editing. Researchers have also suggested that during the drafting stage teachers use questions to help students develop their content rather than point out errors or make negative comments (Gungle & Taylor, 1989).

Another common cause of writing apprehension uncovered in the literature is a fear of revealing oneself (Thompson, 1979). Revealing thoughts in writing makes one vulnerable in so many ways-from what is being said to how it is being said. The workshop process, with pre-writing peer discussion groups, allows students to test their ideas before committing them to paper (Reeves, 1997). Focusing on technical writing (Raisman, 1984) can move the student away from issues that may be too personal or too revealing.

While these are but two of the causes of writing anxiety, almost all of the strategies addressed in the literature to combat these and the other causes are part of the writing process. One might assume that teachers who use the writing process would have students devoid of writing anxiety. But our study showed that this is not necessarily the case. Writers who knew and used the writing process still suffered from writing anxiety even though they were aware of "how" to proceed with their writing. Perhaps this can be explained by one of the earlier pieces of literature on writing anxiety, which pointed out that every writer has a certain amount of anxiety (Bloom, 1979); it is a natural part of the writing process and becomes dysfunctional only in the extreme. As L2 teachers, we must be ever cognizant of the fact that our students have perhaps more significant linguistic, cultural, and psychological needs than mainstream L1 students, and may be more apt to suffer from writing anxiety. We need to guide them skillfully but gently into the world of academic writing.

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