

**Investigation of Freewriting Activities  
in ESL Process Writing Classrooms**

**by**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Freewriting is one of the modes of informal expressive writing often used in L2 process writing classrooms. Although the basic premise outlined by Elbow is upheld, freewriting can manifest itself in many different ways, according to the different constraints that are placed on the basic premise. In particular, when freewriting is adopted as an activity in ESL classrooms, the classroom decision making process becomes much more complicated than freewriting described in the literature. This study reports a qualitative investigation of the freewriting activity in 3 ESL process writing classrooms in a Canadian university, using multiple data collection methods. In particular, the study focuses on the perceptions of 8 students about the functions and methods of implementation of the freewriting activity. The context of freewriting in practice is examined using Woods' (1996) perspective of classroom structure, and to understand the eight students' perceptions of the freewriting activities, notions from Hayes' (1996) new framework for writing are borrowed. The study reveals that sub-activities of the freewriting activity are interrelated, and that each sub-activity plays a specific role in the benefits of freewriting. Implications for ESL instructors' implementation of the freewriting activity in the ESL process writing classroom are presented.

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# **Chapter One**

## **Introduction**

### **1. Background**

The process writing approach has been one of the most important influences on the field of second language (L2) writing for the past few decades. In general, as the developments in L2 composition have been mostly influenced by first language (L1) composition research, the guidance for this approach stemmed from L1 process writing research (Krapels, 1990; Silva, 1990; Zamel, 1984). Since Emig (1971) established a research design for investigating the writing process with her case study, the research with regard to L1 composing processes has flourished, and accordingly, it has had a great influence on L2 writing process-oriented research, theory and practice (Krapels, 1990).

There is an informal expressive mode of writing often used in the context of the process approach to L2 writing that has been discussed with various different labels, such as personal journal writing, dialogue journal writing, impromptu writing and freewriting. These writing modes seem to reflect the philosophy of the process approach in terms of viewing writing as a process (the initial writing does not have to be perfect), placing importance on content rather than correctness, and putting emphasis on idea generation. A number of studies support using informal expressive writing in ESL contexts by demonstrating certain beneficial effects, such as increasing writing fluency and confidence, and developing ideas in writing. For example, Lucas (1990), through her case studies of nine ESL students, reported that students who had done ‘personal journal writing’ had

benefitted from the experience, since students gained confidence in their writing ability, and discovered new insight into themselves. Peyton (1990) reported the positive effect of dialogue journal writing on ESL students, in terms of promoting their acquisition of English grammatical morphology. Knepler (1984) introduced an informal experimental writing mode, called 'impromptu writing,' to ESL college level students which encourages students to write as much as possible within a limited time, focusing only on content, and receiving little error correction from a teacher. Soucy (1991) recommended freewriting as a tool for learning and written language development for ESL students, particularly for those students who are preparing for the academic community.

Although the names and the functions for using informal expressive writing are different, the notion of these writing modes all have basic characteristics in common, in terms of the view of writing, student writers' focus on writing, and a certain range of functions of the writing practice. In this regard, these writing modes seem to have been treated as a single entity in research and practice of an informal writing mode in the ESL classroom. Since freewriting was the only mode of informal expressive writing practiced in the classrooms that I have observed, my focus in this thesis will only be with freewriting in L2 context. However, since there is little research on freewriting in the L2 context, I refer to the literature on other informal expressive writing modes (personal journal writing, dialogue journal writing, and impromptu writing) when discussing the benefits that all informal expressive modes have in common.

Freewriting, like most research in L2 composition, was first introduced to the field of first language composition. Freewriting was developed in the L1 context by Peter

Elbow (1973), who outlined its basic premise as a time limited exercise where students write down whatever is in their mind, without stopping, without apprehension of grammatical accuracy, focusing only on content until the time has expired. A number of studies investigated the adoption of freewriting to L1 educational settings, and have shown its positive effect on developing students' writing quality (Cheshire, 1991; George & Young, 1991; Hammond, 1991; Mullin, 1991).

Freewriting also drew some L2 researchers' attention to its great potential in the teaching and learning writing contexts, and it has been advocated for its beneficial effects in L2 settings. Raimes (1983) introduced 'the free-writing approach' as one of a variety of approaches to teaching writing in the ESL classrooms. In this approach, students are directed to produce vast amounts of freewriting, without worrying about grammatical accuracy or organization. When implementing this kind of writing practice, the students learn not to be afraid of putting words down on paper in English, and ultimately their writing becomes more fluent (Raimes, 1983). Dodds (1989) presented freewriting, in her Advanced German Composition and Conversation course, as a good exercise to improve the general quality of written work and to enhance students' speaking ability as well.

In L2 practice even though the basic premise as outlined by Elbow (1973) is upheld, freewriting can manifest itself in many different ways, according to the different constraints that are placed on the premise. For example, Dodds (1989) in her German language class applied the constraint of focusing the content of freewriting on one topic, so called focused freewriting. She found that focused freewriting was an exercise which increased the general quality of students' writing, as well as enhance their oral skills. In

the case of Soucy's (1991) study, focused freewriting was used as a tool for learning in the academic field for ESL students, in terms of promoting critical thinking. The exercise was for students to record their experiences, plans and reflections, on the process of doing a library research project. When Raimes (1983) introduced the notion of freewriting as one of the approaches to teaching writing in the ESL classroom, she suggested focused freewriting on given topics, but also having minimal correction of errors and students' reading their work aloud to the class. She opened the door for teacher based decisions on implementation of freewriting, according to the functions that are required in a particular context. For example, if writing fluency is the main function of the exercise, then there are to be fewer constraints imposed, no topic requirement, and no error correction at all.

Given that such variation in the practice of freewriting occurred among the various studies mentioned, it may also be that the specific procedures used to carry out freewriting in the classrooms may be different; since these are teacher based decisions, different teachers may make different decisions. However, when the benefits of using freewriting are discussed, the previous studies do not provide an in-depth examination of the specific procedures used to carry out freewriting, and their impact on the overall success of using freewriting in the specific context. For instance, even in the context of a single ESL class, freewriting can be implemented, by a classroom teacher, as a classroom task or as homework; it can be adopted as a technique in order to search for a topic or generate more ideas on a selected topic for a formal writing project, or as a writing exercise to increase fluency and speed of students' composition; for a freewriting topic, it can be assigned by a teacher or selected freely by individual students; students can switch a topic

anytime or should focus on only one topic. These different procedures of ways of carrying out freewriting can have different effects on ESL students whose backgrounds are individually different, and thus the effects may be perceived differently from those outlined in the literature. If this is the case, then various functions of freewriting and procedures may bring about different effects. In other words, the success of freewriting may be dependent on the specific aspects of its implementation, which need to be examined.

One way to investigate such different effects on the benefits of freewriting by variation in implementation is to look into the students' perceptions in the ESL context. Students who come from a diversity of backgrounds might not see the same value in the way that the proponents of freewriting suggest, either because of different procedures of carrying out freewriting by a teacher or because of individual differences of ESL learners. What learners believe about what they are learning and what they need to learn has a great influence on their receptiveness to learning (Horwitz, 1987). That is, what students want to learn strongly affects what they learn in writing classes (Leki and Carson, 1994). Therefore, when we discuss the classroom application of a teaching and learning technique, it is crucial to examine how the participants perceive and interpret the various "events" which make up the implementation of the technique during the class (Woods, 1996). However, few studies have reflected ESL students' perceptions of the benefits of freewriting (and those that have been done are based on the teachers' perspectives or researchers' framework); moreover, none of the studies have looked into students' perceptions, in terms of the specific ways that freewriting was carried out by a teacher in

the context of a course.

Before examining students' perceptions of the specific implementation of freewriting in a ESL writing classroom, it is necessary to know first what freewriting consists of in the context of the present study. Hayes (1996) has provided a new framework of writing with a range of components suggested to be important for the full understanding of writing, from the perspective of the interaction of the writers with their writing environment. In the general organization of his model, there are two major components called 'the task environment' and 'the individual,' and each component consists of several sub-components. He emphasized careful consideration of all the components of a writing task in the study of composition. He stressed:

I believe that each of the components is absolutely essential for the full understanding of writing. Indeed, writing depends on an appropriate combination of cognitive, affective, social, and physical conditions if it is to happen at all..... No theory can be complete that does not include all of these components. (p.5)

Based on his framework, in order to understand freewriting thoroughly, it would seem to be useful to examine the components of freewriting in context, considering the components of the task environment (the specific context of where freewriting is carried out and the specific procedures) which can be studied by classroom observation, and the components of the individual, which may be investigated through the individual students' perceptions.

Thus, to investigate freewriting in practice, we need to know what components of the task environment are involved in the implementation of freewriting, and how they

appear in the specific classroom context. According to Woods (1996), every classroom event is composed of several subsections, and each subsection is divided into several components. In the structure of a classroom event, Woods stressed that each component has its own function, and that all the events are interrelated within the structure. He argued that because research has not described the structure of classroom language teaching to explain the relationships among the units in the structure, our understanding of language teaching causes a gap between theory and practice. To minimize the gap, if it exists in freewriting, it may be necessary to examine what the sub-components are in freewriting, what the functions of each component are, and how they are interrelated in the structure of the writing classroom.

In the interpretation of students' perceptions, it is important to analyze thoroughly the factors which might influence their perceptions. As mentioned earlier, what students believe about learning strongly influences their receptiveness to learning, which is related to their perceptions of learning, thus it may be crucial to know what influences their beliefs; what kinds of factors intervene in their learning situations. For instance, the students' past successes with strategies in handling their academic writing can become factors that influence the way the students deal with writing tasks (Marsella, Hilgers, & McLaren, 1992). Also, ESL students tend to apply their previous learning experience to new situations (Leki and Carson, 1994). In particular, it is important to take into account the factors for motivating student learning, since motivation is inextricably linked to learning and achievement (Williams & Alden, 1985). Therefore, such factors that may influence students' opinions of whether freewriting is beneficial to

them should also be examined.

Some of the freewriting proponents stressed that there is still not enough research on freewriting, although it seems to have great potential to improve students' writing quality (Belanoff, Elbow & Fontaine, 1991). The findings of previous studies regarding the benefits of freewriting seem to be too generalized, and the studies reflecting students' perceptions seem to include only their overall perceptions of the benefits of freewriting. Their analyses are not finely-grained in terms of the diversity of purposes for freewriting in specific contexts, of ways how it is implemented, and the kinds of factors involved, regarding sources of success of freewriting from the students' perspective.

The examination of inter-relationships among sub-activities and their influences on the benefits of the activity, based on students' perceptions, will explain how the students come to see the beneficial effects of the activity. In this way, this study may give us more specific ideas on improving instruction of freewriting activities in the ESL contexts.

## **2. Research questions**

The present study is based primarily on a qualitative approach including interviews with eight ESL students, classroom observation notes, lesson materials, students' logs, and supplementary interviews with the students' writing teachers. Additionally, there is one survey conducted to address a very specific issue. The research questions focus on one type of freewriting (called 'log writing' by the teachers) which was used as a classroom activity, in three process writing classrooms, in an intensive ESL program of a

Canadian university. The following research questions are presented to investigate the functions and procedures of the components of the freewriting activity, and how these relate to the benefits of the freewriting activity, from the eight students' perspectives in these three ESL writing contexts:

- 1) What are the major components of the freewriting activity observed in the three writing classrooms, *i.e.* the procedures and sub-activities by which freewriting is carried out?
- 2) What variations in the implementation of the sub-activities are observed in the three writing classrooms?
- 3) What are the students' perceptions of the sub-activities and the ways in which they are implemented?

Questions number one and two attempt (based on observation of the three classrooms, analysis of lesson materials, and supplementary interviews with the writing teachers), by peering into the structure of the freewriting activity, to investigate what the actual procedures and the variations of implementation are in the ESL context. These two questions are to provide the basis for question number three, the core of the study, intended to examine eight students' perceptions of the findings of these previous questions. The findings of the three questions provide a starting point for discussing what the sources are of the benefits of the freewriting activity from the perspective of the eight students. The findings suggest a number of implications for teachers who are implementing freewriting in their classrooms.

### **3. The organization of the study**

First, in order to provide the theoretical groundwork for the study, I begin chapter two with a literature review of freewriting as well as on some issues in the L2 writing context in relation to the procedures for carrying out freewriting. Then, chapter three introduces the research methodology used for the study, including information about the participants, the context of the writing class, data collection, and data analysis. I also provide the rationale for using a qualitative approach to this study. In chapter four, I present the findings of the research with the answers to the three research questions. In the last chapter, I discuss the findings and suggest implications to produce more effective freewriting instruction, and directions for the teachers in the context of the ESL classroom.

Through the examination of the answers to the research questions, this study attempts to provide a deeper understanding of instructional aspects of freewriting in ESL classrooms. Further, the investigation aims to gain insight into how the freewriting activity fits into the overall ESL process writing classroom by questioning its functions.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Theoretical background of research**

#### **1. Informal expressive writing mode**

As discussed in Chapter One, the emphasis in this study is on freewriting, which is one of many different modes of informal expressive writing in practice in L1 and L2. One of these modes of writing, journal writing, has been particularly well researched, in terms of the benefits the activity has in a variety of different contexts. Unfortunately, the freewriting activity as it is implemented in the L2 classroom has not been examined as much as other modes of informal expressive writing, particularly journal writing, in the literature. Therefore, in this investigation of freewriting - one specific type of informal expressive writing - I am using some of the research that is known from different modes specifically in L2 contexts, because these types of writing have functions and characteristics in common with freewriting. For example, there has been some research (Holmes & Moulton, 1997; Lucas, 1990; Peyton, 1990; Vanett & Jurich, 1990) on the sources of the benefits in journal writing in the specific L2 context, but none on freewriting, so I would like to use what we have learned from journal writing in the L2 setting as a guide in this study. In the next section the various different modes of informal expressive writing are described.

#### **1.1. Journal writing**

Journals provide a place to practice personal expressive writing, and keep a record

of an educational experience and intellectual growth (Dickerson, 1987). They have been traditionally used in English and language arts classes to assist writers' experiment with their language progress. In these classes, students are encouraged to express freely in their journals their personal opinions about subjects in their own voices. They have also been widely applied in a variety of educational settings such as nursing, education, or counseling, to help learners keep track of their learning growth, or sometimes associated with observational fieldwork in science classes (Fulwiler, 1987). A great deal of research on various types of journal writing has been published to date in both L1 and L2 (Gannett, 1992; North, 1987; Persi-Haines, 1991; Peyton, 1990; Soucy, 1994; Sternglass, 1988).

There are two types of journal writing that are commonly applied to ESL contexts: *personal journal writing* and *dialogue journal writing*. Teachers who use personal journal writing encourage students to write particularly about their personal experiences, in order that the students get blocked less in expressing their ideas on paper, but with no pressure to reveal private aspects of their lives. Students develop their confidence as writers through personal journals as they get used to recording their life on paper (Vanett & Jurich, 1990). Teachers respond to the content rather than the form of students' writing, and do not correct errors (Lucas, 1990). Dialogue journals are conversations between a teacher and an individual student on paper, taking place regularly throughout an entire school year or semester. Its only requirement for students is to write regularly as much as they want about whatever they choose. Teachers do not grade or correct student writing, but respond only as a conversation partner who accepts without question what is written when they write back to the students in their journal. The typical

content of dialogue journals is about the discussion of course content, rather than completely open-ended topics (Peyton & Reed, 1990).

### **1.2. Impromptu writing**

‘*Impromptu writing*’ is another mode of informal expressive writing, designed by Knepler (1984) to increase English writing practice in her first-semester college ESL freshman composition class. Students doing impromptu writing in the class were encouraged to write as much as possible within a set period of time (for about ten to fifteen minutes), focusing on content rather than correctness. To change the emphasis from error-free products to a more communicative process, she recommends informal and experimental writings more than graded and formal essays. Several kinds of pictures clipped from magazine are suggested as prompts for writing, and students exchange their writing with classmates to make short comments on their partner’s paper.

### **1.3. Freewriting**

Elbow (1973) introduced *freewriting* as a powerful writing technique to develop writing quality. According to his view, the essence of freewriting is that students write down whatever they can think about with a time limit imposed (usually ten to fifteen minutes). Students need to remove almost all of the normal constraints involved in writing and concentrate only on putting words down on paper without stopping. The following description by Elbow illustrates the main idea of freewriting exercises:

Never stop to look back, to wonder what word or thought

to use, or to think about what you are doing. If you can't think of a word or a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write, I can't think of it. The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind. If you get stuck, it's fine to write I can't think what to say, I can't think what to say as many as you want; or repeat the last word you wrote over and over again; or anything else. The only requirement is that you *never stop.* (p.3)

The proponents of freewriting demand removing all the usual rules associated with writing, such as being aware of audience, spelling, grammar and mechanics, focusing on one topic, caring about the quality of writing, and so on. This mode of writing includes only one constraint -- to write without stopping. They say that there is no plan, aim or goal for freewriting, and view freewriting as the process of discovery of the content (Belanoff, Elbow and Fontaine, 1991).

#### **1.4. Summary**

The informal expressive writing modes mentioned so far, although they have been discussed with different labels in the literature, have several common features. First of all, in all these modes, writing is process, not finished product. The students who practice these writing modes are told to focus on content and ideas, rather than form. Also, students' writing is not graded and their errors are not corrected, therefore, students begin to feel comfortable with writing, and start to feel less apprehension toward their writing. Since such common characteristics fit into the principles of the process approach to teaching writing, these informal expressive writing modes are often adopted in L2 process writing classrooms, particularly because they share a certain range of common functions

or benefits of writing in L2, such as reducing students' writing apprehension and building confidence as writers, increasing writing fluency, and developing idea generation in writing. As noted in the previous chapter, the present study focuses only on one of the informal expressive writing modes, freewriting, in L2 contexts, but the other modes will be discussed in this study when appropriate.

## **2. The benefits of freewriting**

Freewriting has been advocated because of its valuable functions in various teaching and learning contexts both in L1 and L2 writing. There are several main benefits that have been discussed in the literature, which reflect the philosophy of the process approach, such as reducing writing apprehension, thereby building confidence, improving writing fluency, and developing idea generation.

### **2.1. Overcoming apprehension and building up confidence in writing**

The process approach criticizes the traditional approach of teaching composition for putting so much emphasis on correctness and perfect product, thereby causing the novices to be afraid of writing and to hesitate to express their ideas in written language form. It seems that many people think writing is not so easy and do not feel comfortable in expressing their ideas in a written form because they assume they should produce a perfect piece of writing, which is seemingly influenced by their prior composition experience under the traditional approach. This writing apprehension is not only true in the case of learning to write in a second language, but also in the case of first language

writing. Graves (1978) said that:

For the rest of us, writing is perceived as a form of etiquette in which care is taken to arrange words on paper to avoid error rather than communicate with clarity and vigor.

When writing, Americans too often feel like the man who has been invited to a party of distinguished guests. Being a person of modest station he attends with great reluctance and discomfort. He has but one aim to be properly attired, demonstrate correct manners, say as little as possible, and leave early. (pp.4-5)

Selfe's (1985) case study of one highly apprehensive writer of L1, describes how writers' apprehension can affect their composition abilities. An 18-year-old freshman named Bev in the study lacked confidence in her past high school writing, and her apprehension to write in an academic setting had caused her to have little faith in her own composition skills. Selfe (1985) explains that Bev's fear of writing stemmed from her belief that teachers expected letter-perfect papers from their students. Since she was so scared about having her papers graded, Bev had a ritualized procrastination problem about writing papers which became a necessary part of her composing process. The strange logic of her avoidance behavior was that "If no part of a paper had been written, nothing could be criticized (p.85)." Most of her papers were written and typed at the last moment, therefore she could always attribute her poor writing to the harried circumstances under which the papers were composed. As the previous case study emphasizes, student writers have been so nervous to write a good paper, with complete sentences and proper organization, that they do not take the opportunity to enjoy

expressing their opinion in written form. Students are often anxious about themselves due to their prior experiences with teachers' excessive error correction on student writing (Beach & Eaton, 1984). As Elbow (1973) mentioned, if student writers want to edit their writing at the same time as producing, it would be like the situation when an editor is looking over the shoulders of the novice producers and constantly finding out something missing and wrong in the ongoing papers. No wonder students get nervous, inhibited and in the end cannot be coherent. As a result of such a habitual way of writing, many of them consider themselves as poor writers and become afraid of writing itself. Faigley, Daly and Witte (1981) claimed that low-apprehensive students produce longer essays and develop ideas better with more information, than students who have a higher anxiety of composition.

To reduce their anxiety due to the overemphasizing of the mechanical issue of the traditional approach of writing, freewriting seems to be appropriate as a first step by giving students freedom to express their thoughts and feelings, without worrying about correctness and formal structure. Lucas (1990) suggested that personal journal writing can be especially good for inexperienced student writers, providing writing practice in a nonthreatening situation.

## **2.2. Increasing writing fluency**

One of the main purposes of the practice of freewriting is to enhance students' writing fluency. As described earlier, learners put down on paper whatever comes to their mind in a certain amount time, just focusing on meaning of content without worrying

about reformulation or rewording. Usually, freewriting is carried out in a classroom several times a week, and through regular practice, it is thought students increase their writing fluency. Being less blocked by not knowing what to say and feeling the power of individual expression, they can record their stories on paper, and develop their confidence as writers, becoming ready to shift toward more formal writing dealing with grammar and structure in their composition (Vanett & Jurich, 1990). Raimes (1983) also agreed that once students get used to putting down their ideas on a page, grammatical accuracy, organization, and the rest, will follow gradually through practicing vast amounts of freewriting.

### **2.3. Developing idea generation ability**

When students complain about the difficulty of writing in a second language, as they usually do, they are talking not only about the arduousness of finding the right words with correct grammar but also about the difficulty of finding and expressing *ideas* in written form (Raimes, 1983). One of the most common worries of student writers is that they do not know how to develop their ideas and how to express them. Students often say that at the beginning of their writing, ‘I can’t think what to say, I don’t know what to write about the topic’. These students normally do not have much experiences of writing to express their thoughts and opinions. They are not familiar with means to get their inner thoughts down on paper, since in the past most language classes teaching writing has not been emphasized as much as have the other language skills - reading, speaking, or listening. Graves (1978) has stated that writing has seldom been encouraged and

sometimes not even permitted, from grade one through university, thereby learners are usually viewed as receivers, not senders. He added that by not learning writing skills, students are robbed not only of a tool for expression, but of an important means of developing thinking and reading power as well.

Contribution of writing to the development of human thought has often been discussed among L1 researchers. Initially, Vygotsky (1962) investigated the relation between thought and word, and described it as a living process which continuously moves back and forth. He said that "Thought is born through words. A word devoid of thought is a dead thing, and a thought unembodied in words remains a shadow (p.153)." We often forget or lose thoughts when we do not expose them in symbol systems, such as a verbal or written form. We also see our inner thoughts that may develop more through using language systems (Vygotsky, 1962). According to his argument, improvement of language ability may have a great influence on the development of thought. Britton (1975) also stated that people learn and understand new ideas and information better when they write about them in addition to reading, talking, and listening. Graves (1978) maintained that writing contributes to intelligence, since writing demands highly complex acts such as analysis and synthesis of thought.

Based on such correlations between language and thought, composition researchers recommend keeping informal expressive writing to develop ideas and thoughts to improve students' learning. Dickerson (1987) stated that through regular journal practice, learners begin to sense the power of their language, and understand their role as the meaning makers in the texts.

### **3. The variations of freewriting in practice**

As mentioned earlier, freewriting can go beyond such general characteristics, and this writing mode can be varied in terms of the appearance and its classroom applications by altering the degree of freedom, privacy, and time given to the writing learners. The written production can be completely private, sometimes shared with one or more peers, or handed in to the teacher for a variety of types of feedback. Writing time can be as little as two or three minutes or as long as student writers want (Fontaine, 1991).

Freewriting has the potential to be flexible for a number of activities for its effective usage according to a different purpose, audience, degree of knowledge of the topic (Marsella & Hilgers, 1991). There are a few studies about the variations on the basic freewriting format (nonstop, no plan, no correction) according to the context of using this writing mode such as self-expressive writing and focused freewriting. Pennebaker (1991) recommended using ‘self-expressive writing’ for the sake of its positive effects on individuals’ psychological and physical health. She claimed that self-expressive writing stimulates deep emotions deep inside individual minds, and encourages students to express the emotions and related thoughts. Focussed freewriting is different from the freewriting defined by Elbow (1973) in that students begin their writing with a subject in mind and try to hold that subject throughout the whole exercise. It is known as an effective technique to promote students’ critical thinking. Hammond (1991) asserted that this strategy helps students to read accurately and respond critically to texts. She added that it is crucial for students to receive timely, nonjudgmental feedback so that they can understand the strengths in their thinking which promotes further investigation.

Such variations of freewriting appears also in the L2 context. Dodds (1989) applied the constraint of focusing the content of freewriting on one topic, which is focused freewriting, in her German language class. She found that focused freewriting was a good exercise to increase the general quality of students' writing, as well as enhance their oral skills. Focused freewriting was also used in Soucy's (1991) study as a tool for learning in the academic field for ESL students, in terms of promoting critical thinking. The exercise was for students to record their experiences, plans and reflections, on the process of doing a library research project. In the process writing class at Carleton University's ESL program (which is adopted as the context of the present study), freewriting is used as one of the essential activities to facilitate writing development with other components of each class, including a formal writing project and a grammar lesson. During the freewriting activity students are not allowed to use a dictionary. They put their dictionaries aside and focus only on expressing and developing their ideas regarding a given topic. To introduce a topic, teachers usually bring some sort of stimulus such as a picture, piece of music, newspaper, magazine or cartoon. Topics are raised either by a teacher or by students, but basically, all students are free to write about anything they choose, regardless of the topic of the day in the class. The time to freewrite on a topic is usually ten to fifteen minutes. Students' logs are not completely private, and are normally handed in to a teacher, or shared with peers (Donaldson, 1990).

The classroom application of freewriting in a single context can also vary depending on a teacher's decision making. The writing topic can be assigned by a teacher or anyone in the class, or even selected by the writers themselves. For example, a teacher

who considers freewriting as a warm-up stage before getting into a harder writing task usually has the students freewrite at the beginning of the class. On the other hand, when a teacher (such as Teacher B in this study) believes that the exercise is a very important one, the exercise is performed later in the class, so that students who may be late for the class will not miss the activity.

#### **4. Perspective of investigation on freewriting activities**

Teaching writing is a multi-dimensional phenomenon in an educational context in which a variety of interactions occur among a lot of variables, and composition research should account for its complexity (Kantor, 1984). The research on writing instruction to date, however, does not provide explicit theoretical models, which thereby causes, particularly often in a L2 classroom context, controversial studies based on partial perspectives on the settings and do not take into account all the relevant factors (Cumming & Riazi, 1997). In addition, many studies about teaching techniques in second language writing for sequencing the presentation of classroom tasks do not explain thoroughly enough how students learn to write and what kind of factors are involved in their learning contexts (Cumming & Riazi, 1997). For example, research on freewriting in the ESL classrooms does not illustrate what freewriting consists of in the classroom, how the implementation influences students in acquiring writing fluency, confidence and the ability to develop ideas in their writing, or what kind of factors need to be taken into account during the procedure of implementing the tasks involved in freewriting. To

provide more explicit instruction of freewriting in ESL classrooms, a broader perspective in the educational context as well as careful examination of specific events and activities in the classrooms need to be addressed in the literature.

Hayes (1996) presented a new framework for fully understanding and better interpreting a range of writing activities. In the new model, he focuses more on the individual aspects of writing than on the other aspects, and Hayes admits that even this writing framework is still being constructed (in particular, the task environment) and does not describe in detail all major aspects of writing. However, since many L2 writing researchers (Cumming & Riazi, 1997; Kraples, 1990; Silva, 1993; Silva, Leki & Carson, 1997) have recently stressed the importance of understanding individual diversity in ESL classrooms, I will refer to Hayes' framework in guiding the analysis of the students' perceptions of freewriting activities in an ESL writing classroom.

Hayes' (1996) framework attempts to explain writing phenomenon in regards to the cognitive, affective, social, and physical conditions of the individual in writing, through looking into the interaction between the task environment and the individual writer. The general organization of the new model consists of two major components: 'the task environment' and 'the individual'. For the task environment, he included the social environment (the audience and collaborators), and the physical environment (the text the writer has produced so far, and the composing medium, i.e. using pen and paper or a word processor). In particular, he paid attention to the recent increase of research on collaborative writing and effects of using a word processor on writing processes. For the aspects of the individual writer, he discussed motivation and affect, cognitive processes,

working memory, and long-term memory. In working memory in writing, he included particularly a visual-spatial component in this new model, which affects understanding the message of the text.

According to Hayes (1996), the task environment is "... all those factors influencing the writing task that lie outside of the writers' skin (p.3)." 'The individual' in the context of the present study refers to the eight students who participated in this study, and 'the task environment' to the sub-activities and the procedures of implementation of the freewriting activity, since they may be the factors influencing the writing task, external to the student. Some of the components of his framework seems to be more appropriate to a formal writing process, in that he included a number of aspects of cognitive processes during the revision process. However, there are many aspects involved in writing, especially for motivation and affect, which may be important factors in students' informal expressive writing and give useful information about how the student perceives the sub-activities and the ways in which they are implemented in their classrooms.

The task environment in the present study, that is, the specific context of where freewriting is carried out and the specific procedure, can be examined more closely through looking into the structure of the activity in the classroom. Woods (1996) has pointed out that one of the gaps in our understanding of language teaching relevant to the theory and practice is that research has not described the structure of classroom language teaching in the context of larger structural units of the course. He stressed that the larger units are relevant to how they operate in class and what goes on in the classroom, and they need to be described in the research of language teaching.

For the description of the structures of language teaching and, in particular, the relationships among the units making up the structures, Woods (1996) proposed two types of nodes. One is a unit followed by a subsequent unit at the same level with specific relationships to those occurring before and after. The other node is in a hierarchical structure with the relationships to its superordinate and subordinate nodes. He explained that the higher level elements represents the reason for carrying out the elements in a lower level. Thus, to consider higher level of contextualization is important for understanding classroom events. It is noteworthy that the hierarchical relationships of the components in the structure are different from normal ('pure') hierarchies. A subordinate node in the structure can be connected to more than one superordinate node, which bring out 'tangled' relationships among the components. Woods concluded that through understanding this hierarchical structure, we know what goes on where, in classroom teaching.

Woods' (1996) perspective helps us to look in a systematic way into a freewriting activity as one of the classroom activities in the process writing class. As an activity in a writing classroom, there will be several sub-activities that make up the structure of the freewriting activity; the sub-activities will be also related to each other in a sequential way and to superordinate nodes such as the node of the freewriting activity or the node of the overall writing class, in a tangled hierachal way (see Figure 1). Then by looking into the interaction between the students and the freewriting sub-activities, as the interaction of the individual and the task environment, we may be able to understand the students' perceptions of the freewriting activity more thoroughly.

## 5. The activities related to a writing task

When teachers attempt to use freewriting as a classroom activity in their writing classes, they will have to think about several aspects associated with the procedure of carrying out this writing activity. From reviewing the previous studies of informal expressive writing mentioned earlier, several aspects can be considered, such as what students write about, how students generate ideas for writing, what is the appropriate time for writing, and how teachers respond to students writing. We have seen a variety of possible alterations in the classroom implementation of freewriting from the previous review, but there has not been much research on the specific aspects of writing instruction - the procedures of various implementation - only for informal expressive writing. Therefore, in this section, I attempt to gain a wider theoretical understanding into freewriting instruction, from research on composition in general, in terms of topic selection, idea generation techniques (called 'brainstorming'), and teacher feedback<sup>1</sup>.

### 5.1. Topic selection

In current research on writing topics, the issue of who should implement topic selection in a classroom has been the primary concern. Raimes (1991) has described different ways of assigning topics in four different approaches to L2 writing instruction. First, in a form-dominated approach class where the focus is on well-organized sentences

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<sup>1</sup> Since there is no research on the different time periods set for actual writing, this matter is excluded from this section.

and paragraphs, topics are assigned by the teacher. Any topic for students' writing serves to let them practice grammatical, syntactic, and rhetorical forms. In a process approach (Raines calls it 'a writer-dominated approach'), it is the students that choose the topics, usually using personal experience to write about. In a content-dominated approach, topics are drawn from the subject matter of either a particular discipline or a particular course, provided by the teacher. In a reader-dominated approach, language teachers examine what other disciplines assign and train students in how to respond to those assignments, for example, by following a model of the appropriate form of academic writing.

The positive effect of the free-chosen topics has been reported particularly for young writers by the process approach researchers, in the sense that with free topics children have more control over the meaning of the texts they were constructing (Kamler, 1992). Graves (1983) suggested that young writers should write on self-selected topics and a teacher's role is to help students to choose their topics well. According to his argument, children can discover subjects of their own voice and maintain the voice in writing about the self-selected topics. Topics should not be assigned from teachers' perspectives because children write best about what they know best. In her six-month observational study of four Southeast Asian children in ESL, Urzua (1987) reported that the children were more effective when they chose their own topics. Edelsky and Smith (1984) have also suggested that most assigned topics fail to motivate children to write as effectively as they do when they choose their own topics. They describe student writings on assigned topics as "inauthentic", and the ones on self selected topics as "authentic",

and reflect that students' writings on their own topics are more neat, carefully illustrated, and extensively revised than writings on assigned topics.

In contrast, some researchers doubt the effectiveness of giving complete freedom and question whether the competence of self-selection in informal writing will transfer to formal writing tasks such as reports and essay questions. Kamler's (1992) study demonstrates that when children are free to choose a topic, they produce a narrow range of content in their texts. Kamler observed two kindergarten children (from Caucasian middle class families) and analyzed their writing texts and interviews with them over two and a half years. The results of the analysis of the children's writing shows that it is not necessarily the case that children produce a wide variety of genres when they are free to choose their own topics. The children in her study tended to avoid moving into fields other than personal experience except when they were given explicit instruction. She claimed that a pedagogy emphasizing free topic choice is problematic. Thus, other fields young children need to explore as part of their learning about themselves and the world should be encouraged.

Lee (1987) suggested a practical way to balance the controversial issue in topic selection for children. She paid particular attention to the question of whether students who were not taught the discipline and precision required in formal writing (such as reports and answering essay questions) will be able to accomplish those tasks with the same competence as the writing task with self-selected topics. She attempted to find a balance between composing on teacher assigned topics and students' own topics, and a way to lead student informal writing form (on self selected topics) to a more clear,

organized, and expository writing, such as answering essay questions. According to Lee's suggestion, students in lower grades begin their learning based on self selected topics, as Graves (1983) claimed, and gradually assigned topics are introduced they move up in the grades. In addition, Lee emphasized that the transition from self selection to assigned topic writing should be approached with minimal anxiety to still develop fluency and confidence in composing with factual information, sorting out what is pertinent, and organizing the details of what they have discovered.

In research on freewriting, the issue of the authority of topic selection, relatively, has not been actively discussed. It may be because the most of the studies of freewriting are about adult students rather than children, and basically adult students choose a topic freely, and are encouraged to write down whatever they want. Pennebaker (1991) stated that students who would like to talk to others but can't because of fear of embarrassment or punishment should be encouraged to express it through their freewriting. Fontain (1991) collected the samples of L1 student writers' (who were freshmen at a university) freewriting (with free-chosen topics) and analyzed the topics and purposes of students' freewriting. The students made use of freewriting in order to record private experiences that have taken place in their lives or imagined fantasy experiences. It was also used in making plans or goals; exploring or searching for solutions to their personal and academic problems; evaluating their personal feelings or experiences. The common topics the students usually wrote about in their freewriting include grades, teachers, particular courses, entertainment, friends, relationships, health, personal philosophy, sports, relatives, dormitories, home, careers, and weather (Fontain, 1991).

Some ESL researchers have focused on the discussion of what kind of topics should be assigned to students. Vanett and Jurich (1990) stated that personal topics are easily accessible to students and do not need outside research, so that student writers will not easily get blocked when expressing their ideas. In the study of personal journal writing, they suggested teachers choose personal experience for topics, so that students do not have to worry about finding information while writing. Peyton (1990) also agreed with using personal topics for writing. Furthermore, she said that students should choose the content from the variety of their life experiences, and through this process, develop a sense of involvement in the writing process (Peyton, 1990).

In general, the influence of writing topic on individual students' writing processes has been under-emphasized in current research on composition (Schumacher, 1986). Moreover, the effect of introducing topics on the students' motivation to write has been rarely discussed in research. One researcher, Brousseau (1996), reported that the participant in her case study often benefitted from picture prompts presented by a teacher, for generating ideas to write logs. Pictures used as topics such as a photograph of a bride stimulated him to reflect on marriage; the picture of an older woman inspired him to write about his mother. According to Hayes (1996), 'visual/spatial' representations, such as graphs, tables, or pictures, have an important role for students in understanding the message of the text. For example, scientific journals, magazines, newspapers, and ads often provide a variety of pictures in order to enhance the visual effects to readers. More studies need to be done to investigate whether such visual support is helpful for students to generate ideas and to increase students' motivation for freewriting.

## 5.2. Brainstorming

As noted in chapter one, regarding classroom application, freewriting can be adopted as a technique to search for a topic or generate more ideas for a formal writing project. Also, freewriting can be used as an independent exercise to increase fluency and speed of students' composition. When it is the case of writing exercises, students may need some idea generation on a writing topic for freewriting itself. Raimes (1983) noted that when students complain about how difficult it is to write in a second language, they are talking about the difficulty of finding ideas for the writing, not only about the difficulty of finding the right words and using the correct grammar. In particular, novice writers may need some time to think about what to put on paper about a selected topic, since there is a time limit imposed in freewriting.

In the process writing classroom, brainstorming techniques are used to help student writers generate a wider and more stimulating range of ideas than the teachers could have suggested alone (Donaldson, 1990). The beneficial effects of brainstorming has been advocated in the literature, in terms of encouraging students to get more ideas and stimulate them to write it down, by exploring a selected topic more specifically with others. Raimes (1983) stated that under the circumstances that ESL students have to use a topic given in a typical textbook (which may not be so interesting to the students as a topic), brainstorming can encourage them to find their own ideas about the topic, through the opportunity to speak and listen to others. This corresponds with Hayes' (1996) explanation that spoken language can offer useful inputs to the writing process in terms of adding content information. In Brousseau (1996)'s action study on a writing process

class, the participant (an adult ESL student) said that the oral brainstorming technique used in class helped him make writing decisions. Czerniewska (1992) also advocated using a brainstorming technique to support young writing learners' struggling for content in their composition.

Clustering is a technique of collecting all ideas from small group brainstorming which can be used by a teacher. Clustering unfolds from a center with a nucleus word or phrase, which is the writing topic. It allows writers to start writing not knowing exactly what, where, who, when, and how, and accepts their wondering, uncertainty, even chaos (Rico, 1983). Rico (1983) stated that clustering can show to students how freely any ideas can be generated on a selected topic of writing. Given Hayes' (1996) notion of visual-spatial effect on understanding the message of the text (mentioned earlier in this chapter), such a visual technique of presenting idea generation may be a good stimulus for students' idea generation in freewriting.

### **5.3. Feedback**

*Teacher feedback in freewriting:*

Elbow's (1973) description of the characteristics of freewriting does not include any type of feedback on freewriting. In fact, he stipulated that providing no feedback on freewriting is helpful for students. However, in the various applications of freewriting, Elbow's view of giving no feedback on freewriting is sometimes ignored. For example, Hammond (1991) stressed that in focussed freewriting, it is crucial for students to receive

timely, nonjudgmental feedback, so that they can clarify the strengths in their current thinking and develop further investigation.

In fact, in the other formal expressive writing in ESL classrooms, such as personal journal writing, dialogue journal writing, and impromptu writing, teacher feedback is provided on students' composition. Noticeably, all of the teacher feedback focus on commenting only on content and ideas of students' writing without error correction. According to the course description of the writing process class (in the ESL program of the present study), teachers respond only to the content of learners' writing, by asking questions, expressing sympathy, seeking clarification, and so on. They believe that this kind of feedback lets students know whether or not their writing was comprehensible (Donaldson, 1990).

**Responding only to content and focussing on communication with students** without error correction seems to be one of main principles of informal expressive writing modes (if there is feedback on student writing), which may be crucially related to one of the benefits of freewriting, reducing students' writing apprehension. But, how does such feedback influence the improvement of the quality of student writing in general? Why do not the teachers using informal expressive writing correct students' errors? More discussion on how to respond to student writing is presented in the next section.

*Debate on how to respond to student writing:*

Over the past twenty years, studies of composition have given considerable attention to the issue of how to provide feedback to students' writing. According to

Cumming's (1985) description, the common techniques that teachers use to respond to a student's writing are evaluation, error identification, teacher correction, marginal commentary, checklists, oral responses, direct instruction, reformulation and peer responses. Focus on feedback is normally either on the writers' ideas (e.g., originality, support and development, clarity) or on formal aspects of the text (e.g., sentence structure, vocabulary choice and usage, cohesion devices) (Boswood, Dwyer, Hoffman and Lockhart, 1993). The question of what would be the most effective way of providing feedback to improve students' writing skill is still going on.

Traditionally, ESL teachers have been concerned with the accuracy and correctness of surface-level features of writing and error identification, and this is still most widely employed for responding to ESL writing (Zamel, 1985). The following description is one of the recommendations provided in the 1970's by ESL professionals as the techniques and practices for ESL teachers' responding to student writing:

Error correction is crucial for learning the writing skill, and correction techniques are essentially the same for controlled and free composition. Using a set list of correction symbols, teachers indicate student errors focussing on the teaching point and previously learned patterns (Bruder and Furey, 1979, p.71).

The proponents of the process approach argue that the directions based on prescriptive grammar instruction have focussed too much on an analysis of texts of a 'product', rather than on the processes of writing. Raimes (1983) argued that a teacher's feedback has been traditionally focussed on correcting grammatical errors and spelling with evaluative comments like "Very good" or "Could be improved," and rewriting some

of students' sentences, rather than judging students' writing as a reader. Therefore, students have seen that what they say in their writing is less important than following the rules of grammar and syntax. They rarely understand that their writing is a piece of reading which could have its own audience (Raimes, 1983).

Meanwhile, the influence of process-oriented research has provided the teacher with a different point of view on errors in student writing. Kroll and Schafer (1984) stated that we should see errors as necessary stages in all language-learning, as the product of intelligent cognitive strategies, and therefore, as potentially useful indicators of what processes the student is using. On the other hand, Keh (1990) suggested that teacher feedback should focus on different aspects of writing at different stages of the writing process, such as focussing on content for initial drafts, organization and style for later drafts, and suggests that surface-level corrections be made only on the final draft.

Although the debate on error correction in the field of composition study is still lingering, writing teachers who implement informal expressive writing in their ESL classrooms mostly give feedback on content since students' writing in those classrooms seen as a draft, not a final product. Also, it may be necessary to provide no error correction, because one of the benefits of those writing modes is reducing writing apprehension.

#### 5.4. Summary

The literature review on the three aspects of writing instruction - topic selection, brainstorming, and feedback - shows that the specific implementation of these aspects can vary according to different functions and different influences. Topics can be assigned by a teacher, which has been the traditional way in the form-focussed approach to writing instruction, or selected freely by a student writer. Free-chosen topics have been advocated by the process approach proponents, especially in the writing classrooms for children, in that young writers can produce more meaningful composition and be motivated to develop more ideas. Other studies against free-chosen topics argue that free-chosen topics for children make the range of topic genre too limited, and therefore, students who are accustomed only to free-chosen topics may not be able to accomplish formal writing tasks. The studies done on informal expressive writing for L1 student writers and adult ESL students do not seem to discuss who should select a writing topic, but emphasize that the subject of a topic should be related to students' private experience. In addition, it is noticeable that the different ways of introducing a writing topic may have certain effects on the motivation of student writers. From the review, the questions for issues relating to topic selection in the context of the present study are who selects the topic, what are the topics that stimulate the students, and how does one introduce the topic. The literature also discusses brainstorming techniques as a means of enhancing student writers' idea generation, and this may also be useful in freewriting in terms of helping with students' common worry - what to write about. In the studies of teacher feedback on student composition, researchers have been debating on what to focus on.

For accuracy, teachers have traditionally focussed on correcting errors in students' writing. However, teachers in the process approach classroom respond only to content and ideas of students' writing, so that they can concentrate on creation of meaning, particularly in drafts. All the discussions on the specific aspects of implementation of writing in classrooms imply that their different functions can have different influences on the goals of the writing task in order to ultimately improve students' writing.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Research methodology**

The data collection for the three research questions (see p.8) of the present study is based mainly on the qualitative approach (case studies of eight ESL students conducted during classroom observation, participant interviews and collecting lesson documents). In this chapter, first, I explain the rationale of using this approach based on a literature review, and then provide information about the participants and the context of the classrooms. The procedures of the data collection and the data analysis are then described. Additionally, there was one survey conducted to address one very specific issue (the magnitude of the ESL students' difficulty in reading teachers' handwriting); the procedure of how the survey was carried out is described in this chapter.

#### **1. The rationale of using a qualitative approach**

According to Hayes (1996), cultural and social factors that influence writing are pervasive, but still there have not been many studies devoted to those factors. Most of the studies are exploratory in character and make use of case study or ethnographic methods (Hayes, 1996). Kantor (1984) also stressed that a study of composition should present a picture of the educational context of writing including the conditions under which students write; the teaching methods and styles; the personalities, attitudes, and learning processes of individual students; and a variety of interactions among these variables. In fact, a number of the studies regarding the writing process in L2 context

(Gaskill, 1986; Lay, 1982; Zamel, 1983) used case studies to investigate their research questions.

Krapels (1990) suggested ethnography as the best research design for the issues of writing processes including participants' point of view in the research context. Miles and Huberman (1994) have stated that qualitative data lets us know what real life is like through focussing on natural and ordinary events in natural settings. Accordingly, it lets us get closer to the 'truth'. They added that the richness and holism of qualitative data may allow complexity to be revealed which is difficult to quantify. There are many variables that influence writing, and before a detailed quantitative study can be done, factors that influence writing in various contexts need to be identified, and thus exploratory studies need to be done so that the right questions can be asked. I chose principally a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis for my research questions, since I believe that a qualitative perspective is appropriate for getting in-depth information on students' perceptions of the freewriting activity, and factors involved in constructing students' opinions about the activity.

## 2. The participants

The participants of the study were eight students of English as a second language in three different process writing classrooms (in the non-credit program) in the intensive ESL program of Carleton University. The students' are five males and three females, aged between 19 and 26. Six of them are from Korea and two from Japan. I met the

three Korean students<sup>2</sup> ( Dong-keun, Tae-soo, and Nam-woo) in the fall term, another two Korean students ( Yun-hee and Ho-joon) in the winter term, and two Japanese and one Korean (Reiko, Tomoko, and Jin-woo) in the following spring term.

Dong-keun had just arrived in Canada when I met him, and it was the first time for him to go to an English speaking country. He graduated from a university in Korea and came to Canada with his wife to take the ESL program. His goal was to improve his general competence in English, and he was planning to take the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) test either for a future job, or for attending a school in Canada. (He was not sure about his future plans, but felt that a high TOEFL score is very important.) The other two students in the first set of data, Tae-soo and Nam-woo, both had experiences of living in English speaking countries, but were born and raised in Korea, and both were still enrolled in Korean universities. Tae-soo just came from Australia to Canada, where he took a three-month ESL program. Nam-woo stayed in the United States of America for one month (he did not take any English courses there) before coming to Canada.

Yun-hee was a 25-year-old female who graduated from a Korean university, with a B.A. in English Literature. She was planning to apply for CTESL (Certificate of Teaching English as a Second Language) program at Carleton University in order to get a job related to teaching English. Before arriving in Ottawa, she took an ESL program for one term in Victoria, B.C. Ho-Joon came to Canada to enroll in the ESL program after taking an ESL program for about five months in the United States of America. His

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<sup>2</sup>All the names of the participants in this study are pseudonyms.

purpose for learning English abroad was to get a high mark in a TOEIC ( Test of English for International Communication) for his future job in Korea. He said that while taking an English program in a private institute in the United States of America, he rarely had any experience in English composition.

Reiko was a nineteen-year old Japanese girl who graduated from high school in Japan, and came to Canada hoping to attend a Canadian university. She had been in Canada for seven months, but was new in the ESL program. Another Japanese girl, Tomoko, was twenty four years old. It was the second term for her to attend the Carleton ESL program. She came to Canada because she wanted to improve her general English skills. Jin-woo was a twenty six-year-old Korean man. He had just arrived in Canada, and it was the first time for him to be outside of his country. He was considering to take the TOEFL test or CAEL (Carleton Academic English Language) test to get into a Canadian or an American university. Background information on the eight students is summarized in Table 1.

For understanding the students' perceptions in this study I would like to mention that all the participants have had a form-centred and teacher dominant education in their schooling. All the participants in this study graduated from their high school in their countries, that is, either in Korea or in Japan. Generally, in the college education setting in Korea, the students write on teacher-given topics and their teacher responds to their writing, focussing on vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar, and mechanics. Student writing has always been evaluated, which causes high writing apprehension among the students (Song, 1997). Teaching English in Japan has traditionally been product-oriented

based on the grammar-translation method, needed to pass competitive university entrance exams. Japanese teachers of English are more interested in the product than in the process of teaching and learning (Pacek, 1996). The six Korean participants have been through the same education background as described above, and the other two Japanese participants have also had a traditional form-focussed learning experience in their previous English education in Japan.

Student	Gender	Age	First Language	Level of the Course	Time exposed to the process writing class at Carleton U.	prior experience of learning English composition
Dong-keun	male	26	Korean	IC 20	new	none
Tae-soo	male	23	Korean	IC 20	new	none
Nam-woo	male	21	Korean	IC 20	new	in an English course at his University in Korea
Yun-hee	female	25	Korean	IC 30	One term (three months)	in prior ESL in Victoria
Ho-joon	male	24	Korean	IC 30	new	in prior ESL in the States
Reiko	female	19	Japanese	IC 25	new	none
Tomoko	female	24	Japanese	IC 25	One term (three months)	none
Jin-woo	male	26	Korean	IC 20	new	none

Table 1. Background information on the eight students.

### 3. The context

The eight participants in this study were attending the process writing classes in the non-credit intensive ESL program of Carleton University. The process writing class (six hours a week) is a compulsory component of the intensive English language course, and provides an example of the implementation of the process approach (Brousseau, 1996). The goal of the course is to inspire in each student the confidence and ability to adapt to various levels of the process of writing, including topic selection and idea generation, conferencing and revision (Magahay & Woods, 1990).

ESL at Carleton University are offered at four levels, called IC10 (basic level of English), IC20 (low-intermediate level of English), IC25 (intermediate level of English) and IC30 (high-intermediate level of English). As shown in Table 1, four of the students in this study are from IC20 class, two of them are from IC25, and two from IC30 class. There are twelve weeks of instruction in the fall and winter terms, six weeks in the spring and summer terms, and four weeks in the late summer term. The writing course included the writing of both formal rhetorical patterns (in particular, for the academic writing at university level), a grammar lesson and regular (each class) freewriting (which was called by the teachers "log writing") activity. Evaluation of the writing class is based on the accumulation of all written work including log entries, evidence of conferences, and one final formal writing project. The writing folder is evaluated in terms of quantity and quality (Donaldson, 1990).

#### 4. Data collection

There are three sets of qualitative data in the present study, and one quantitative result from a survey. The three sets of data were collected at three times throughout the term, on eight different students, but all as described earlier with similar educational backgrounds. It was decided to choose eight students as opposed to studying a smaller number of students throughout the year, because initially<sup>3</sup> I was not concentrating on the evolutionary development of the students' perceptions toward freewriting, but rather on identifying the factors that influence students' opinions and how they relate to the success of the various sub-activities and the rest of the class. By increasing the number of students I have increased the possibility of identifying the important factors involved in forming students' opinion of freewriting, rather than just the factors that are relevant to a smaller number of students if a longitudinal study was done. The first set of data was collected during the fall term (12-week) of the ESL program from Dong-keun, Tae-soon, and Nam-woo. The second set of data was from Yun-hee and Ho-joon during the winter term (12-week). The last set of data was during the followed spring term (6-week) from Reiko, Tomoko and Jin-woo.

To improve the credibility of the findings and interpretations in the study, I used Denzin (1978)'s suggestion of the technique of 'methodological triangulation'. The notion is to use different methods of data collection to broaden perspectives towards a

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It should be noted that emerging patterns appeared in the data which suggested evolutionary development of some of the students attitudes. This is discussed in the final chapter.

final interpretation. Every data set includes classroom observation, interviewing, and document collection (e.g. students' logs, lesson materials, etc.). These methods of collecting data are described in more detail in the next few sections.

#### **4.1. Classroom observation**

I observed the three writing classrooms that the participants in this study were attending, in order to find out the structure of a writing class and the specific tasks and techniques in freewriting activities. During the observations, I recorded the lessons and took notes to assist in the transcription process. The observation helped me to understand better the participants' reflections, the interaction of the classroom, and the functions of each task in the lessons. For instance, while attending the writing classrooms, I could see how a teacher introduced the topic with what kind of technique, how brainstorming and idea collection were carried out, the students' reactions when they received feedback, and so on.

#### **4.2. Interview**

The findings of this study are based principally on transcripts of the interviews with the eight students, since I was mostly interested in students' perceptions of classroom activities in this study. Seidman (1991) has stated that he interviews people to hear their stories when he wants to know their consciousness of social and educational issues. To those who would argue whether telling stories can be science, Reason (1981) said that good stories in social sciences stimulate people's minds, hearts and souls and bring them

new insights in their problems and the human condition, which we cannot directly get from natural sciences. Seidman (1991) also mentioned that interviewing allows us to understand people's behaviour and action founded on observation. According to Seidman's description, the purpose of in-depth interviewing is to understand other people's experience and the meaning they make of that experience. Interviewing is a powerful way to gain insight into educational issues through understanding the experience of the individuals whose lives constitute education (Seidman, 1991). Consequently, in-depth interviewing enabled me to know more about what the students' experiences are, and the meanings of their behaviours in the classroom, which I could not notice through classroom observation alone.

The major focus of interviewing the students was different<sup>4</sup> from one another during the three sets of data collection, except one point, the questions about the general perception of freewriting effectiveness (such questions as "What do you think of freewriting?" "Do you see the beneficial effect of the exercise?"), were given to all participants. In the first set of data, the interviews consisted of (from September to the first week of November in 1997) a group interview with three participants and in a effort to remain unbiased and let the students comments lead me to emerging patterns, my questions were more about their general feeling of writing classroom and freewriting exercise in the class. I wanted to know how students pictured the exercise in their mind

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The reason for this is because the interviews were carried out at different stages in my study, and at each stage patterns began to emerge, so that the questioning began to change and focus on these patterns.

before I gave them specific and concrete questions. So, at first I told them I was interested in all the classroom activities and students' learning English in general and just let them talk about the class of the day, like chatting. For example, the questions that I gave them were: 'How was the class today?' , 'What did you learn today?'. Fortunately, they often spontaneously (I did not have to coax them, and so remained unbiased in the questioning) talked about freewriting of the day, and once someone addressed the topic of freewriting or anything related to freewriting, then the others also made some comments on it. I rarely interrupted their conversation and just showed interest in their opinions while audio-taping and taking notes.

Sometimes, I asked, 'What did you do at the beginning of the class?' In spite of knowing that the freewriting activity is usually carried out first, since I did not want to lead freewriting as a topic of the interview on purpose and attempted to elicit their perceptions of freewriting from their thoughts on the overall activities in the writing classroom. Through processes like these, I found the specific questions that I could ask in order to explore students' perceptions of freewriting. Regarding the practice, they talked about a teacher's feedback, the length of writing time, the topic of the day, discussion on the topic, their self-evaluation on their writing, the effect of freewriting exercises, and so on. Based on those points in their conversation, I came up with specific questions for the following interviews in the second and third data sets.

In the second and third data sets, my interview questions focussed more on students' perceptions of the developing themes (noted in previous paragraph). In these terms, besides asking questions about their general impression of the writing class and

freewriting, I asked more specific questions in the order depending on the progression of the interview related to my research, such as:

- What do you think about the topics of freewriting?
- What do you think about the brainstorming activity?
- How about the time for freewriting? Is it appropriate?
- How do you feel about a teacher's feedback on your freewriting?

I met the students once every other week during the one-term period (normally one term is about three months), so the interviews were conducted with every participant about 4 to 6 times. (Owing to different personal time schedules, the number of times I interviewed each person is individually different.) The last data collection was carried out in the spring term (from April to May) with two Japanese girls and one Korean man. Unusually there were not many Korean students enrolling in the ESL program during the term, and thus, it was difficult to find Korean participants. I selected Japanese students instead, since their English learning background is considered similar to Korean students, and the cultural difference would be less than students from other countries such as Latin America, Middle East, or Europe.

The interviews with six Korean participants were conducted in Korean, and the interviews with the two Japanese students in English. Thus, the quotes only from Korean participants were translated from the original Korean comments into English, whereas the comments made by the Japanese students were transcribed literally. Although the two Japanese students' proficiency in English was not at the advanced level, their oral proficiency was good enough to convey their opinions as shown in their comments

presented in the next chapter. I usually met them in the cafeteria on campus after their classes, avoiding lunch time and crowded time, so that I could record our conversation. In general, one interview lasted for approximately 90 minutes.

#### **4.3. Document collection**

In addition to the observation notes and the transcripts of interviews, I also collected lesson materials in the class, such as articles or pictures for introducing topics, grammar lesson handouts, and the students' logs with the teachers' comments.

#### **4.4. Survey (regarding legibility of teachers' handwriting)**

While interviewing the participants, I found some of them had difficulty in reading a teacher's handwritten comments on their logs, because of their difficulty in recognizing the letters. Thus, I conducted a survey on a larger group of students addressing this problem to find out the scale of the problem in the writing classes of the ESL program.

The question posed to the students in the survey was:

Q. Is there any problem to read a teacher's handwriting of the comments on your logs?

If there is, how difficult is it for you to read?

Very difficult to read      Difficult      a little bit difficult      readable      easy to read

(       )      (       )      (       )      (       )      (       )

Forty-six ESL students in four different classrooms of the same process writing program participated in answering the question.

## 5. Data analysis

As mentioned earlier, most of the data in this study are based on the transcripts of the interviews with eight students. To analyse data systematically, I was guided by the procedures described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) for a constant comparative method of data analysis. Through this method, qualitative data can be analysed in systematic ways to discover underlying themes, and lead to a framework for a theory. However, in my analysis I used the model only as a means of processing the data, not to develop a theory, as is suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985). First, independent of a stage in the model, I reviewed the interview transcripts and field notes from the observation and audio-taped lessons, checking with the collection of the students' logs and lesson materials, so that I could get a general idea of what the students were saying and what kind of classroom activities occurred in the classes. From this level of data collection, I was able to categorize the data at surface-level, but I treated the categories as dynamic and flexible, to discover where the data would lead.

The first stage of the Constant Comparative Method is to code incidents in the data into as many categories of analysis as possible, and then to look at common patterns in the data. As mentioned, the initial categorization of the content of all the data in this study was divided into five categories: topic selection, brainstorming, writing time,

feedback, and overall perceptions of the freewriting activity. According to the categories, I marked what appeared to be relevant passages and made brief marginal notes as rough classifications (e.g., advantage of teacher assigned topics, the benefits of brainstorming, strength of timed writing, functions of teacher feedback, and so on). The main rule of the Comparative Method is to code an event for a category, and then compare it to previous events in the same and different coding groups. I used this technique repeatedly to come to understand the factors involved in each category. I then searched for the repeated patterns and inconsistent or negative statements with the initial rough classifications. For example, under a coding of 'advantage of teacher assigned topics', I included the quotes below:

Tomoko: ... in the last term, the writing teacher always said that "You can write anything." Anything is not specific, that is why we always got confused about what we should write... but in this class, Teacher C always gives us only one topic, so that we can write.

Yun-hee: ... it is good for preparing for the TWE test. You have to write about a given topic quickly in 30 minutes.....

Then, as inconsistent opinions, I included:

Reiko: ... I think that 'sky' is very abstract word... it was difficult to write.....

Then, inductively derived themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) emerged from these categories of the data, such as an example from the presented quotes: 'teacher assigned topics were positive to these students,' 'students do not like an abstract topic,' thus, a new theme

emerged such as ‘abstract words selected by a teacher is not good for a topic.’

For the last stage, I compared the themes from the final categories and their properties, and discovered relationships among the themes of the categories. Later, I compared such themes to the theoretical framework in the literature, to understand whether the findings fit in with the current views of freewriting.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Findings**

#### **1. Preliminary notes**

The findings of the present study are to be treated as exploratory and informative, since the research setting is limited to one specific context, one type of freewriting in the process writing classroom of the Carleton University ESL program, and the students' perceptions are derived from a limited number of participants (only Korean and Japanese students) through open-ended interviews.

As noted earlier, there are different types of freewriting classroom application depending on its functions and relationships to other course activities. Thus, I provide a specification of the type of freewriting discussed in this study.

From the observations of the three writing classrooms, it was found that the classroom teachers were using two different types of freewriting, for different functions in the writing class. One type was when freewriting was adopted as part of a formal writing project in order to help students' search for topics and idea generation. This type of freewriting is placed at the initial stage in the formal writing process. The other type of freewriting observed was as an activity which was independent from other components of the writing class (there were other components consisting of one class, such as a grammar lesson and a formal writing project). The teachers termed this activity "log writing" and used it in order to enhance students' fluency and confidence in English writing. In this case, the usage of freewriting was as an independent activity ('log writing' in this context),

and it became one of the components of classroom activities with its own particular functions and effects on the students in the class.

Freewriting in the present study refers only to the freewriting activity (log writing) as a component of a writing class, which was used as a separate writing exercise to enhance students' writing fluency and confidence, and idea generation skill. I chose this type of freewriting to analyse in this study because when interviewing students about freewriting it was this type that they mentioned not the other type used in the formal writing process. Also, this freewriting activity was used for a range of benefits in common to informal expressive writing, such as increasing writing fluency and confidence as well as idea generation, thus, this type of freewriting was considered to be more relevant than the other type of freewriting. Therefore, the findings from the data analysis intend to examine this freewriting activity in terms of the structure, the functions, the implementation procedure, and their effects on students.

## 2. Findings

The findings of the present study are presented according to the order of the research questions mentioned in Chapter One. The answer to question number one (*What are the major components of the freewriting activity observed in the three writing classrooms, i.e. the procedures and sub-activities by which freewriting is carried out?*) intends to describe the sub-activities in the context of the basic structure of the freewriting activity in common to the three writing classrooms, determining the function of each sub-

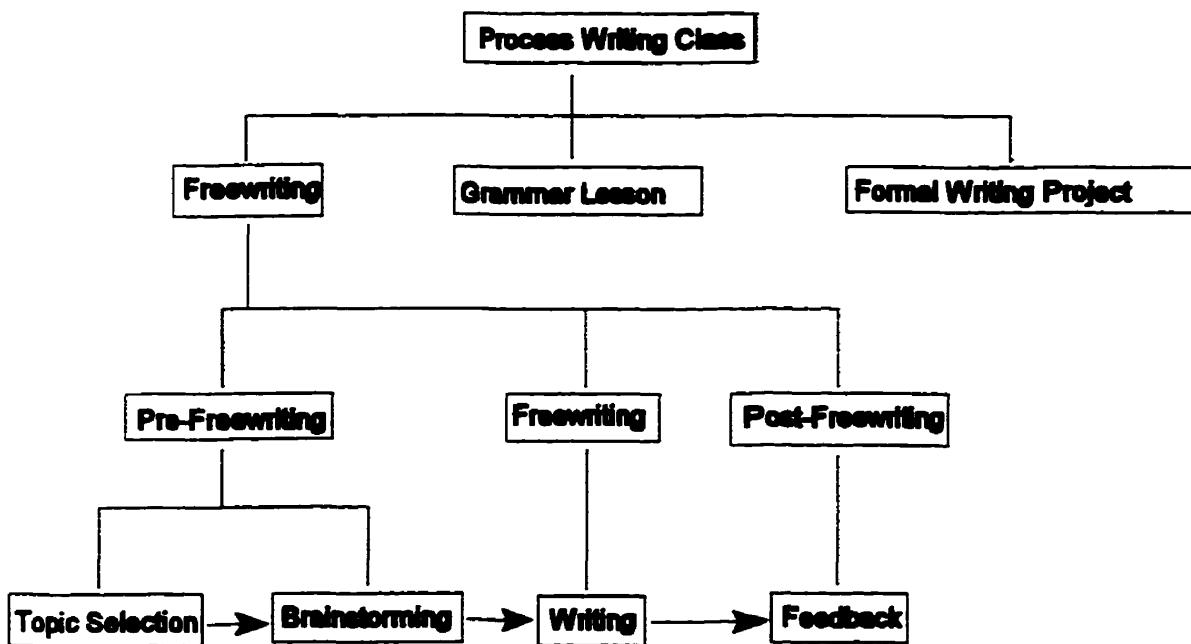
activity, based on my classroom observation and the analysis of the teaching documents.

In addition, a brief explanation of the general procedure of the sub-activities are provided.

For question number two (*What variations in the implementation of the sub-activities are observed in the three writing classrooms?*), the specific ways of carrying out each sub-activity implemented by the three writing teachers are illustrated based on the observation notes, and the collection of documents including teaching materials and students' logs. Based on the range of procedures for implementing the freewriting activity which was established from question number one and two, question number three (*What are the students' perceptions of the sub-activities and the ways in which they are implemented?*) present the comments of the eight students (who participated in this study from the three writing classrooms), according to the order of the general procedure of the freewriting activity.

#### **2.1. Research question one: *What are the major components of the freewriting activity observed in the three writing classrooms, i.e. the procedures and sub-activities by which freewriting is carried out?***

As a result of the observation of the three writing classrooms, the freewriting activity (called 'log writing' by teachers in the writing classrooms) was being carried out as one of the components of the process writing class, along with other components such as a grammar lesson and a formal writing project, and the type of freewriting was close to focused freewriting, in that there was an assigned topic which students were supposed to focus on while freewriting. Similar to Woods' (1996) perspective of the structure of



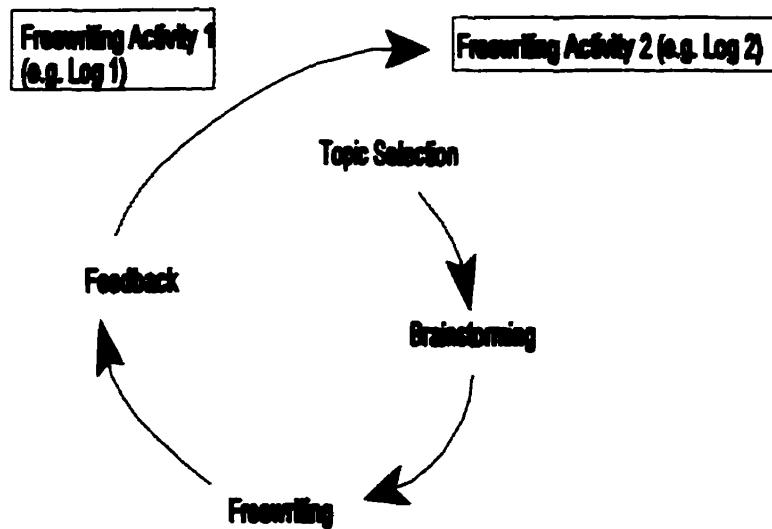
**Figure 1.** The basic structure of the writing class showing the hierarchical and sequential relationships of the components.

classroom teaching (described in Chapter Two), the freewriting component in these three classrooms can be broken down into three sub-actions: pre-freewriting activity (topic selection and brainstorming), freewriting, and post-freewriting activity (feedback on student writing). That is, the sub-activities of the freewriting activity in the writing classrooms were topic selection, brainstorming, writing on the selected topic, and feedback on student writing. Figure 1 illustrates the basic structure of the writing class, showing the organization of the components of the freewriting activity. In the structure shown in Figure 1, all of the sub-activities are connected to the freewriting activity as a subordinate level, which implies that all of them play a role in implementing the activity.

In this study, I use the term ‘function’ to refer to the role that each sub-activity plays in the structure of a freewriting activity. Based on the classroom observation and the field notes of the teachers’ instruction, the functions of the four sub-activities are as follows.

First, a topic provides a writer with a notion to concentrate on, and to develop ideas within the range of the thematic stream, to fill a sheet of paper. Topic selection for freewriting focuses on choosing an interesting and motivating prompt which allows students to write freely and to enhance their writing fluency. It was observed that Teacher C was explaining to the class that “topic should be something that encourages or pushes you to write”. Brainstorming on the topic functions to help students generate wider and more stimulating ideas for their freewriting through explaining their own ideas to others and responding to others’ ideas. When they explore many ideas through talking about a selected topic, students may readily get into the actual writing mood. The actual writing is the core activity of the structure of a freewriting activity. This activity provides the place where the students express their ideas generated through the pre-freewriting stages in written form; where they can develop fluency and quality of their writing through the practice of actual action. Feedback is a response to the students’ written production, and influences their motivation and attitudes towards the next freewriting activity.

According to the structure of a freewriting activity, the four sub-activities are at the same hierarchical level and are related to each other sequentially, that is, one occurs before or after the other during the class. Brainstorming is carried out after a topic selected for the log of the day. Then, the actual writing period proceeds, followed by the



**Figure 2.** A model of the freewriting process

feedback period after the logs are handed in. The submitted logs are returned to the students with feedback usually in the next class. Thus, it seems that the function of each sub-activity connects one to the other, which implies a model of the freewriting process that is sequential and recurrent as illustrated in

Figure 2.

## 2.2. Research question two: *What variations in the implementation of the sub-activities are observed in the three writing classrooms?*

Elbow (1973) described the procedure of freewriting such as that students put

down on paper whatever they can think of within a certain amount of time (he mentioned ten to fifteen minutes), emphasizing that there should be no feedback on the students' freewriting. However, according to my observation of the three teachers' instruction and classroom interaction in the writing classrooms, the procedure of carrying out the freewriting activity, and the variations in implementing the freewriting sub-activities were more complex.

It was observed that the three teachers usually followed the general procedure as described above as Figure 2, that is, topic selection, brainstorming, writing, and feedback. A teacher brought up a topic for the log writing and wrote it down on the blackboard with the number of the log. Then, students brainstormed on the topic in groups, or in the whole class with the teacher. The writing time was normally about fifteen to twenty minutes, and the teacher collected students' logs before going on to the next activity of the class. Unlike Elbow's direction for freewriting exercises, the teachers in this writing program gave feedback on students' logs by making some comments on the content. The students received back their logs with the comments usually the next class.

According to the observation of three writing classrooms, the specific procedures of the freewriting activity to be carried out by the three teachers were different and each teacher's implementation was different from one day to the next. Sometimes it was observed that the teachers did not implement all of the sub-activities as outlined in the previous section . Using the brainstorming technique was very flexible, in that the teachers sometimes had students brainstorm on a given topic, and sometimes the students skipped brainstorming and just wrote right after selecting a topic. In the feedback on

freewriting, the students received comments on their freewriting from their teacher, but sometimes also from their peers. The next section will describe how each of the four sub-activities can be carried out in different ways.

The placement of the freewriting activity in the class was different among the three teachers according to the classroom teachers' individual decision making. This freewriting activity seemed to be normally placed at the beginning of the class in the Teachers A and C's classrooms, but Teacher B carried out freewriting after a grammar lesson activity, so that even a student who is late for class could participate in the freewriting activity. This is due to Teacher C's beliefs that the freewriting activity is more important for the students than obtaining grammatical knowledge. Teacher B said:

We have some grammar just at the beginning, making it short..... a little grammar awareness thing, language awareness,... but, the important thing is to have everybody in the class write a lot, and in the morning they are often a little bit late, so the reason I put it first is if they miss it, it is not a big deal.. so grammar goes first... and when everybody is there, the freewriting, one of the most important things.

### 2.2.1. Topic selection

According to Elbow's (1973) original notion of freewriting, students are supposed to write about anything in their minds while freewriting. However, the ESL program encouraged the writing teachers to stimulate students' interests in writing topics by using a variety of prompts, such as writing down some words or phrases and showing pictures, pieces of music, or cartoons, while still allowing the students to write whatever they want

(Donaldson, 1990). The three teachers usually assigned the topic for freewriting, on the other hand, sometimes Teacher C asked students to submit sources to be prompts for writing like pictures. The topics introduced by a teacher were only suggestions (students were still allowed to choose their own topics) in order to prompt students to freewrite.

The teachers often used various pictures as prompts when they introduced a topic to their classes. Teacher A told me that she brought a picture which related to a topic in order to help students' generating ideas about the topic. Teacher C also often used a picture as a prompt, such as a picture of an old woman or a picture of an umbrella and money. After passing around a picture, she explained the class that the picture is for a prompt, and what the prompt is for. She said, "Prompt is something that encourages or pushes you to write." By means of collecting pictures for prompts, she asked students to submit any picture, music, or articles they think might useful as a prompt.

### **2.2.2. Brainstorming**

Brainstorming was implemented in two different ways, such as in a teacher-fronted discussion or in a group of three or four students. Teacher A carried on discussion, led by herself in front of the class, or sometimes put students into groups. Teacher C also carried out brainstorming sometimes in groups, sometimes in a whole class led by herself. Before getting into the discussion, she said to the students, "Why don't you talk about the picture? You can write about anything that picture pushes you to write about." When the teacher-fronted discussion was carried out, Teacher C let students express their ideas freely, and wrote down the ideas on the blackboard. When the discussion was carried out

in groups, she put students into a group of three or four, and asked them to share ideas they might have from the picture. Then, she collected the ideas from the group discussions by writing them down on the blackboard. In addition, she sometimes used the clustering technique to share the ideas with the whole class.

### **2.2.3. Freewriting**

One of the few limitations in freewriting is that writers have to finish their writing within a certain time, generally fifteen to twenty minutes (according to Elbow's notion). In the ESL writing classes of the present study, approximately fifteen to twenty minutes were given to the students to complete their freewriting. For the sake of improving writing fluency, the practice of speed writing seemed to be considered essential in the writing classrooms, and thereby, timing became one of the important elements of the freewriting activity. Teacher A, in her instruction of the freewriting activity, emphasized to the class that "By writing quickly and focusing on ideas more than language, you can improve both your writing speed and fluency."

### **2.2.4. Feedback**

While some writing researchers claim that freewriting should be completely private, the teachers in this study gave feedback on students' freewriting. The types of feedback of the teachers I observed were responding to the content of the students' writing by asking questions, expressing sympathy, or adding their own opinions on the topic. Very rarely, the comments on the general quality of the composition and sentence-

level structural features were observed, but usually no error correction on students' freewriting.

Teacher B told me that the ultimate purpose of her response is to let students learn how to distance themselves from their writing so that they may look at their writing objectively, and to give a critique to be able to read critically. She had strong beliefs on the value of no error correction, as stated below:

I give feedback on the draft in progress. I have never mentioned their language, ever. I don't really believe that much in error correction... working on the content, organization, that's the primary. The feedback and no grammar and spelling.

Teacher A said that through the comments, she intended to encourage the students to write with more complex ideas, and to push them to develop their language using longer sentences. She also noted that the reason for making comments on students logs was to make students continue the freewriting exercise, since the students would be less motivated to keep on freewriting every class without receiving any feedback. Teacher C also made comments mostly on the content, but sometimes, comments on the language in the students logs, such as "a good sentence" was observed.

### **2.3. Research question three: *What are the students' perceptions of the sub-activities and the ways in which they are implemented?***

#### **2.3.1. Topic selection**

*Assigned topic:*

In my study, the statements of some of the students revealed the positive roles of assigned topics for their freewriting. Having given one topic before writing, they could get into the composing process immediately without wondering what topics to find to write about. In addition, since they had to respond quickly to the given theme in written form, freewriting with an assigned topic seemed to be a good way of preparing for tests of English writing. Tomoko pointed out that having an assigned topic for freewriting was more helpful for her to come up with more specific ideas to write about than just writing whatever she wants:

Tomoko: ...yeah, in the last winter term, the writing teacher always said that You can write anything. Anything is not specific, that is why we always got confused about what we should write. . . But in this class, Teacher C always gives us only one topic, so that's why we can write.

Tomoko was probably not aware that the assigned topic was only a suggestion, not a requirement for her freewriting, and she could decide her own topic any time. Her comment shows that she preferred to freewrite on an assigned topic and believed that it gave her some guidance, rather than abruptly putting anything down on paper. In fact, most of the participants in this study chose the given topics to write their logs rather than choosing topics for themselves. Another participant, Yun-hee, said that she found freewriting activities useful to prepare for the TWE (testing of writing in English) test, because of the time limit imposed:

Interviewer: What do you think about writing a log?  
Yun-hee: I think it is good. For example, it is good for preparing for the TWE test. You have to write quickly in 30 minutes. It is important to write very quickly for the

test. It is good for learning how to write quickly.

On the other hand, the following comment made by another student, Ho-joon, implies that the freedom to choose a free topic on their own, and to switch to another topic whenever they want to still gives a positive influence on students' writing anxiety.

Ho-joon: She (Teacher B) usually suggests us just to try to write about a given topic, although we do not have any ideas about it. And if I know the topic is too difficult, then I can switch to another topic. So, I feel comfortable...

*Type of topic:*

Students seemed to be satisfied with a topic which gave them many specific ideas to write about, no matter who selected the topic. The criteria of the students' judgement of a "good" topic was whether it was one that they could come up with many ideas. If the topic stimulated them to come up with many ideas for their logs, they regarded the topic as a "good" one:

Dong-keun: If the topic is interesting, if I can think of many things to write about, then it is okay. However, if the topic is too difficult or not interesting, like yesterday, about a 'Dead tree,' I didn't have many things to write on even in Korean. Then, like today, the topic was 'Freedom,' and I can have many things to say about freedom relating to the situation with North Korea.

However, what kind of topic gives the students more ideas seems to depend on personal experience and background knowledge. Dong-keun did not like the phrase 'Dead Tree' as a topic, because it did not give any connection to his experience. On the

other hand, he liked another abstract word, 'Freedom,' since it reminded him of the situation in his country, and this gave him ideas to talk about.

Some students expressed that when the topic corresponded to a word that they could visualize, or a part of their daily experiences, it was easier for them to think of the content for their freewriting. This fact was reflected in Tomoko's statement:

Tomoko: For example, like subject of colors, such as 'yellow', 'pink'... that is very difficult to write. But if the teacher gives materials like 'coffee', 'cassette tape' or 'paper'... at that time, we can write more easily, I think. In my case, if she gives me some pictures, it is easy to imagine about my topic.

Students also expressed the difficulty in freewriting with a topic which did not give specific ideas to write about based on their knowledge or experience, as shown in Reiko's comment:

Reiko: Ah... I think that 'sky' is very abstract word... it was difficult to write. At first, I thought, okay, I could write about 'sky,' but when I started writing, I got stuck... I just kept on writing whatever I thought... but there is no point, no.

#### *Introduction of topics:*

As described earlier, the teachers often used a variety of methods to introduce topics for freewriting. The method of using visual material as a means of representing a topic, in particular, was considered by the students a good way to get more ideas. For example, the following quotes show that students liked the pictures that teachers used to introduce a topic, since they found it interesting and stimulating to come up with more

ideas than when a teacher assigned a single word or phrase:

Jin-woo: I prefer it when teachers show pictures for a topic. I get more inspiration and ideas from pictures than from just a word. When a word is given for a topic, I have to try to come up with ideas. However, if a picture is shown, I just write down my first impression from the picture. It is somewhat different visually.

Tomoko: Yeah, if I saw a picture, then it is easy to write . . . but just a word like the sky, something like that, it is very difficult to write. I prefer showing something, instead of just a word, like a picture.

### **2.3.2. Brainstorming**

*The purpose of brainstorming:*

The literature notes the beneficial effects of brainstorming, in that it helps student writers to select a topic, explore the selected topic, encourages them to find their own ideas through the discussion with others (Brousseau, 1996; Raimes, 1983). Students indicated their agreement with the benefits of brainstorming because it helped them prepare for freewriting which they had to quickly respond to a topic with many ideas:

Interviewer: Does brainstorming help you to get more specific ideas?

Tomoko: Yes . . . first, if I don't have any idea, then my friend, she said something. At that time, I got some good ideas and then, I can, I can say something. That's why, I think, it is very helpful.

Reiko: Even though it is freewriting, we need its preparation like brainstorming, even though a lot. Because we wouldn't

think about a topic without 3 to 5 minutes brainstorming, so we need brainstorming.

As Reiko mentioned, brainstorming was an effective activity for the students, in particular, before they got into the actual writing period, since they were required to put their thoughts down on paper as many and fast as they could within fifteen to twenty minutes.

*Group brainstorming:*

As mentioned by some of the participants earlier, discussing a chosen topic in groups certainly seems useful and helpful for students to generate more ideas for freewriting on a selected topic. However, some participants mentioned the fact that the efficacy of brainstorming depended on who the group members were in the discussion. Reiko and Tomoko complained about unfriendly group work participants who prevented them from successful brainstorming:

Interviewer: What do you think about the brainstorming activity

Tomoko: It is helpful, but it depends on the people of a group. Some classmates say, 'No problem, we have nothing to argument about... " No, then brainstorming is not good. But if I am with good classmates, then it is really good.. I can get more ideas to write about the topic.

Interviewer: What do you think about the brainstorming?  
Did you find it helpful?

Reiko: Uh-huh, I like it. But it depends on the group...if there are persons who don't like this sort of thing, then, I think, they just disturb me. But if the group work is good, then it is very good. I can know another point of view...it helps me a lot..

Interviewer: So, if you were a teacher, would you like to

use the brainstorming activity?

Reiko: Yeah, whenever I do this, I want the teacher to think about how to make a group. I don't want to be in the same group with a student who doesn't want to talk about a topic... there are some students who I don't want to be with in the same group.

As Tomoko and Reiko said, when all the group members participated in brainstorming, students were satisfied with the activity and found it helpful, in particular, for idea generation. However, when there were a few who did not participate actively, the rest of the students did not seem to feel advantages of the activity.

*Teacher-fronted brainstorming:*

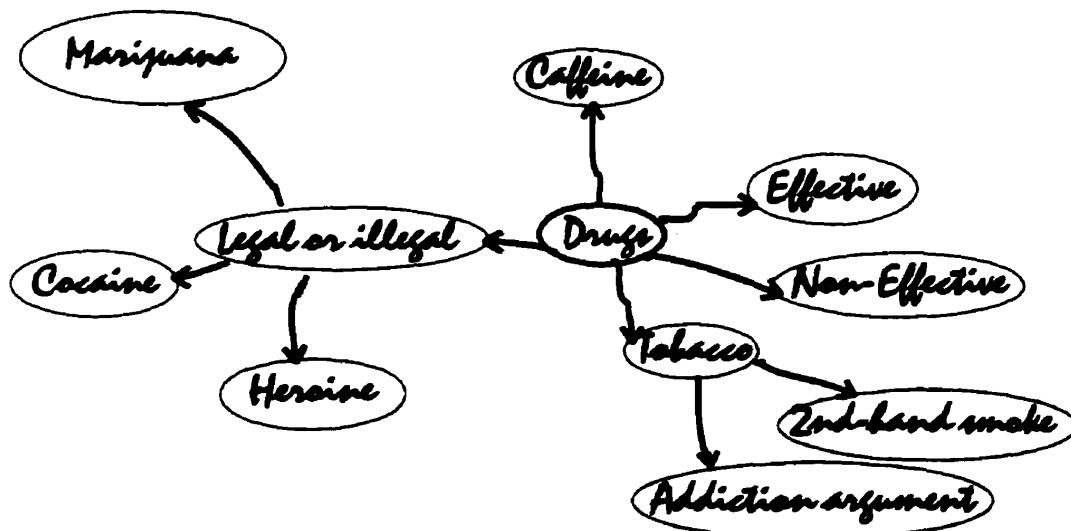
For the writing teachers, it is difficult to put students into groups to make all of them satisfied with their group members. Nevertheless, the teachers should try to deal with the situation and find any technique to make up for the disadvantages of some students (like the cases of Tomoko and Reiko), so that they can experience the efficacy of the activity. In this regard, it is noteworthy to pay attention to Reiko's comments as below:

..then, after the small discussion, the teacher writes all of ours' opinions on the black board, so we can know another's opinions.....

According to Reiko's comments, whole class brainstorming led by a teacher might give students, who did not enjoy the group brainstorming because of an insincere group member, another opportunity to listen to other groups' opinions, thereby making up for

inefficiency in their group discussions.

In addition, during the Teacher C's classroom observation, I noticed that when she was presenting all the group's ideas (after group brainstorming) by using the clustering technique as shown in Figure 3, the students seemed to be paying close attention to the teacher's clustering, and looked interested in the collection of ideas by the technique. Therefore, clustering might be an effective technique not only for generating and presenting ideas but also for drawing students' attention to the on-going activity.



**Figure 3.** An Example on the Blackboard When the Clustering Technique was Implemented.

### 2.3.3. Freewriting

#### *Time limit for freewriting:*

Brousseau (1996) claimed that the timing element is beneficial for the freewriting activity, in the sense that timing by the teacher encouraged learners to start writing immediately, and to participate in the activity more actively. In fact, she reported that the participant of her case study believed that freewriting forced him “to push his brain and pull out something (p.15)”. My participant, Reiko, also indicated the benefit of freewriting within a limited time in the classroom.

**Reiko:** We have been writing a journal for homework in the Core Class, it takes usually one hour to write one page, while when I write one-page of freewriting in only 15 to 20 minutes.

She articulated the effectiveness of freewriting in the classroom with all her classmates. She liked the fact that the teacher limited freewriting to fifteen to twenty minutes, since the situation gave some positive pressure to make her freewrite faster than she would in the situation of no pressure.

#### *The length of writing time:*

For some students, especially those who had little experience in English composition previously, the time limit may be too short to respond to a given topic in written form. Jin-woo and Reiko’s comments raised the possibility that the length of the writing time might be too short for some of the ESL population:

**Interviewer:** How do you feel about the freewriting at first?

Jin-woo: When I was writing by myself before, there was no time constraint but I was still able to write quickly. Then, in this class, I felt that it was hard to get used to writing quickly in 15 minutes.

Interviewer: How about the time to write a log about a given topic? Do you think the time is appropriate, about 15 to 20 minutes? Is it too long or too short?

Reiko: Too short, almost every time. I need 25 to 30 minutes. Every time the teacher says, Okay, Let's finish. Then I always say, Wait, wait... But for another student, I think, for them, it is too long. I am slow at writing down, I think... I am not used to write drafts or whatever writing... so I need more time than other people...

Since many times Jin-Woo and Reiko couldn't finish their logs in twenty minutes, they eventually evaluated themselves as slow writers compared to their peers. In fact, I observed that Reiko often handed in her logs to the teacher at the very last minute.

#### **2.3.4. Feedback**

As a result of the analysis of students' logs, there were two different types of teacher feedback found, comments on content and ideas of students' freewriting, and complimentary comments on the general quality of composition or sentence-level structural features. In the interviews it was found that students had different perceptions regarding different types of teacher feedback. In particular, according to students' opinions, the comments on content and ideas (which was the feedback in most of the cases) seemed to have various functions, such as letting the students know whether their freewriting is comprehensible, reducing writing apprehension, encouraging students to practice freewriting regularly, and helping students to build confidence. On the other

hand, there were some negative views of teacher feedback about no error correction and difficulty of reading a teacher's handwriting.

*Comments on content and ideas:*

Teacher feedback in the form of comments on students logs let students know whether their writing was comprehensible such as the following comments made by Tae-soo and Jin-woo which indicate that they indeed used teachers' comments to determine whether the teacher understood what they wrote in their logs:

Tae-soo: The other day, from the teachers comments, I realized that she did not understand completely what I wrote. She was talking about something different from what I originally meant. In this way through the relevance of their comments I can know whether my writing is understandable.

One of the major principles of freewriting is not to worry about spelling, grammar or sentence structure. It seemed that when the teachers' comments focused only on content it led students to believe in the principle of no error correction, and to encourage them to participate in the activity without anxiety toward writing in English. The students confessed that owing to the teacher's friendly comments, they could feel really comfortable with log writing and believed that they did not have to worry about making errors in their logs:

Jin-woo: I felt comfortable after reading her comment. We (students) usually look at teachers comments to check whether there is something wrong in the writing, or if there

is a mark... Her comment makes me have no burden for the next writing. Even though I do not have anything say about a topic, I do not care and just jot down anything freely.

Reiko: After reading her comment, I felt that she is a teacher but a friendly teacher. So, I feel free to write, to express myself.

Yun-hee: It (the teacher's comment) makes me have no burden for the next writing. Even though I do not have anything say about a topic, I do not care..... Continuously it makes me write the next one without burden..... These comments doesn't affect me a lot, but makes me feel comfortable in writing the next log.

Teacher feedback also provides students a forum to communicate with their teacher, and to develop more thoughts through a teacher' comments. Reiko reflected that she felt comfortable with her teacher (Teacher C) through the teacher's comments on her log.

Interviewer: What do you think of the function of her comments in terms of your improving writing skill?

Reiko: At first, she said in her comment, Nice to meet you, and asked me some questions about my future. . . I wrote about the travel from Vancouver to Ottawa, then she said that she wanted to go to the East.

Ho-joon also seemed to enjoy the conversation with his teacher through logs, discussing the issue in the topic:

Ho-joon: The topic was about abusing drugs. I wrote about Ben Johnson and his disobedience of the spirit of the Olympics. The teacher agreed with me. She doesn't like abusing drugs either...

Teacher A stated that through the comments, she intended to encourage the students to write with more complex ideas, and to push them to develop their language using longer sentences. The following comment by Tomoko seems to correspond to such teachers' intentions as Teacher A's, in terms of generating more ideas. Tomoko pointed out that teacher feedback inspired her to see a different point of view:

Interviewer: Was the teacher comment useful for you to write the next log?

Tomoko: Yes, because her opinion is the opposite, opposite... so if I saw this one, she always sees the opposite side. When I read her comments, I always find new things, that's why I say it is useful..... She always gave me her opinion. She didn't suggest anything but when I read her opinion, at that time I can get some new ideas. And then next time when I write freewriting, I can use her idea.

In addition, teacher comments play an important role in encouraging students to practice writing regularly, by proving to the students that all their logs are read by the teacher. The following statements of some participants show that teachers' conscientiously giving comments on every student's log impressed the students, and motivated them to participate in the activity more. For example, Yun-hee and Ho-joon were impressed with teacher comment on their logs and appreciated their teacher's effort and attention to individual students:

Yun-hee: I wrote the same thing as before: 'I was exhausted, so I went skating. It was fun...' Then she said, 'Don't forget SAD (Seasonal Affection Disease)' again, probably because I mentioned the same thing before. Also, she added, 'You are working a lot of things very hard. Don't forget SAD. Enjoy your life.' She seemed to be worried about me...

Ho-joon: I felt comfortable at her comment. We (students) usually look at the teacher's comment to check if there were something wrong in my writing, or if there is any mark... But here, it is very nice of the teacher to respond the log which I put little effort on.

The two students' comments imply that teachers' warm comments as means of feedback can be good motivation for the students who were accustomed to teacher-dominated education system where student composition is always evaluated and teacher feedback focuses only on corrections and grades, in no relation to the communication between a teacher and students.

*Complimentary comments:*

Although the suggestion of the ESL program regarding teacher feedback on freewriting was to focus only on content, it was observed that the teachers responded to the general quality of writing or sentence-level structural features in students' freewriting with complimentary comments. This type of feedback seemed to have strongly influenced students' motivation and building confidence. This is reflected in Yun-hee and Jin-woo's comments below:

Yun-hee: She (Teacher B) said my writing was good. I felt quite good and got more confidence. I was stimulated by her positive comment on my writing.

Jin-woo: Some of her simple but evaluative comments, like 'excellent sentence,' give me a chance to check several expressions that I specially used in my writing, you know, I can know that was the right way to express.

However, it may not be always good to give complimentary comments on student's logs. The following comments made by Yun-hee (about her previous writing teacher) shows complimentary evaluation does not always bring positive effect on students' responses.

Yun-hee: Honestly, the teacher there (in her previous language school) do not seem to have been educated systematically in a regular program as writing teachers. Their comments were always complimentary. I felt very good at first, but then came to think they were just superficial comments.

*The perceptions of no error correction:*

Although the students seemed generally satisfied and impressed with the teachers' conscientious feedback and comments, some of the students complained about no error correction on their freewriting from their teachers as shown the following comments by Dong-keun and Yun-hee.

Dong-keun: I wish that she would correct my writing, like saying "This is wrong. You should write in this way..." I would like to know whether my English sentences are right or wrong. I am not a native speaker. I hope that she would point out my mistakes, rather than just giving comments about her feeling.

Yun-hee: Honestly, I don't like that the teacher does not correct grammar in my writing. In the previous school, I used to look at my writing again after I received error correction from a teacher... but here, I have to neglect my errors because the teacher did not let me know them.

It seemed that particularly at the beginning of the term, there were strong disagreement with no error correction (in teacher feedback on freewriting) between the writing teachers in the ESL program and the students who expected to learn grammatical knowledge from their teachers.

*Reading the teacher's comments:*

The students' comments revealed that there are some factors that influence whether or not the students actually read the teacher's comments on their logs, such as the time when the logs are returned and the teacher's handwriting. These and other factors appear to have a direct impact on reducing the student's motivation to read the teacher's response. I note that all the comments of this section are from the transcripts of Yun-hee and Ho-joon's interview, since it was such a significant factor for their attitude toward their teachers' comments. Therefore, during the interviews with them, I focused particularly on the difficulty in reading a teacher's handwriting.

Ho-joon had not read three comments out of all the comments on the eight logs that I randomly selected out of his twenty-four entries for one term. Two of the three times he neglected to read the response, he did so because he received the log immediately before going for lunch and decided not to read them at the moment, since he thought they might take a long time to read. However, when the teacher returned logs to him during the class, he always read her comments. Whether or not students read the feedback may be partly determined by the time the teacher chooses to return the log entries, as the following comments suggest:

Ho-joon: No, I didn't read this. I got this log when the class was over, and just went for lunch deciding to read later. But I didn't. If I don't read the comment right after receiving it, then usually I do not look at it again. Actually, it is not a big deal not to read it... (Log #10) .... Actually, I always try to read her comment as soon as I got it back, but if it seems to take a while to read it, then I just go for lunch. (Log #13)

When he was in a hurry to go for lunch, he thought that it might take a long time to read the teacher's comment, since her handwriting looked very hard to read.

In fact, there is a combination of factors that made him decide not to read the comments. One of the noticeable reactions from both of the two participants (Yun-hee and Ho-joon) to Teacher B's comments is to her handwriting. Throughout the period of interviewing, both students complained about not being able to read her handwriting easily. In fact, even though they answered "Yes, I read" when I asked whether they read the teacher comment, the next utterance from them was usually that "It is hard to read her handwriting. I just read it very roughly. I cannot recognize these letters easily". Yun-hee told me that she sometimes did not read the whole comment because Teacher B's handwriting was too difficult to read. She could not concentrate on the meaning of the comments easily and did not understand them very well:

Yun-hee: Honestly, I still have a problem understanding her handwriting. I can't concentrate on it very well, so I do not read the whole comment. I just read very roughly or sometimes give up. I am influenced by the handwriting a lot. (Log #6)..... Yes, I read it. But this handwriting was too difficult to read, so actually I didn't understand it very well. I just read it very roughly. (Log #12)

Ho-joon had the same problem. Since it took such a long time for him to read the comments, he sometimes did not read them at all. Though the time factor mentioned earlier is related to this problem, his difficulty in deciphering the teacher's writing also affected his willingness to read the comments:

Ho-joon: No, I went for lunch without reading. Actually, I always try to read it as soon as I get it back. But if it seems to take a while to read it, then I just go for lunch. It is because of her handwriting. It takes time to read and is difficult to read well.

Ho-joon mentioned the handwriting problem in relation to almost every log (in five out of eight). He even asked classmates to read it for him, but found they had the same difficulty. Later on, he became lazy and failed to read the response carefully, and even sometimes neglected it. This neglect may be attributable to the fact that students are not required to rewrite the log after reading the teacher's comments. However, it seems to be true that they have been bothered very much by the illegible handwriting:

Ho-joon: Yes, I read the comment, but I couldn't read it very well. (Log #4)..... When I ask my peers, they can't read it either. The teacher has told us to ask her if there is any problem with reading her comment, but there are a lot of students in the class and it is not easy to ask her every time. (Log #13)

Interestingly, Ho-joon pointed out that the difficulty in reading a teacher's handwriting might be greater for students who are not accustomed to the cursive alphabet than for those who are from countries where the alphabet is used in their mother tongue:

Ho-joon: I guess most classmates do the same as I do. When I asked them to read for me, they could not read

either. But, some people, who are from the countries where they use the cursive style of English handwriting, seem to be better at reading it than those are not.

It was a very interesting point that students who use Roman alphabet letters in their first language might understand the teacher's handwriting easier than students who don't. In fact, the complaint about the teachers' handwriting is from the students of Teacher A and Teacher B. The students of Teacher C did not express any difficulty in reading the teacher's comments in their logs. It seems that because Teacher C wrote her comments in print, the students had no problem in recognition of the letters. Teacher C told me she consciously changed the style of her handwriting from her usual handwriting (cursive style) to print style (lower case), and tried to write clearly.

With the inspiration of the comments of these students, and realizing that what kind of feedback a teacher provides is irrelevant if students do not read it, I decided to conduct a small survey on this issue among the ESL students in the same program. The result of the survey is presented in the next section.

*Survey of ESL students' difficulty in reading teacher handwriting:*

A survey was conducted to examine the magnitude of the problem of whether ESL students had difficulty in reading teachers' handwritten comments on their logs. The initial assumption of the survey was that in the ESL writing classrooms, students whose first language's alphabet is apparently very different from the English Roman alphabet, would have more difficulty in reading teachers' handwritten comments on their logs, than

those students that are used to the Roman alphabet in their first language. In the analysis of the data, I categorized Korean, Japanese and Chinese students as the 'Asian'. In many ESL programs, most of the Asian students are these three language native speakers, and very often they are the majority in ESL classrooms. I then categorized the rest of the students as 'the others'. Among a total of 46 students, 33 students' native language are these three, and 13 students are the native speakers of the other languages, such as Turkish, Spanish, Arabic, Italian, Indonesian, Thai and Tamil.

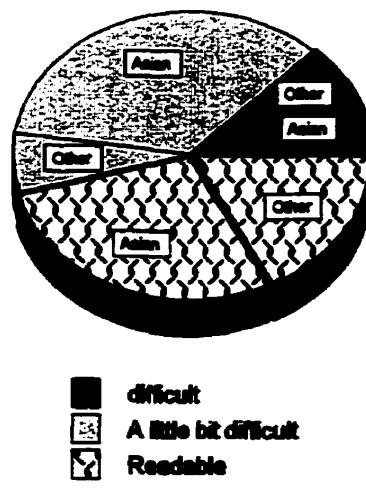
The responses of the 46 students appear only in the three categories (difficult, a little bit difficult, and readable), none of the categories on the extremes (very difficult to read and easy to read) were selected. Therefore, I used only these three categories to represent the data in the tables and figures.

As shown in Table 2, six students out of forty-six responded to 'difficult,' nineteen students to 'a little bit difficult,' and twenty students to 'readable.' To answer the initial assumption that students in the 'Asian' category would have more difficulty reading teachers' handwriting, I analyzed the number of each category according to the two different groups - the 'Asian' and the 'others' - as shown in Table 2. Twenty out of thirty three Asian students expressed that they were having difficulty in reading their teachers' handwritten comments on their logs, while five out of thirteen students in the 'other group' seemed to have the difficulty as shown in Figure 4.

**Table 2.** Difficulty in reading teacher handwriting of the ESL students

	The Asian students (n = 33)	The others (n = 13)	total (n = 46)
difficult	4 (12.1%)	2 (15.4%)	6 (13.0%)
a little bit difficult	16 (48.5%)	3 (23.1%)	19 (41.3%)
readable	13 (39.4%)	8 (61.5%)	21 (45.7%)

This question is a statistical, not a qualitative one, but the sample size is not adequate to make a definite result. However, this survey did show that there is a potential issue worth investigating further. It is noted that the two categories 'difficult' and 'a little bit difficult' should be seen together because these are categories which indicate that the students had *some* difficulty in reading teachers' handwriting. If the results are merely to answer the question

**Figure 4.** Degree of the handwriting problem for all students in the survey.

## The Asian Students

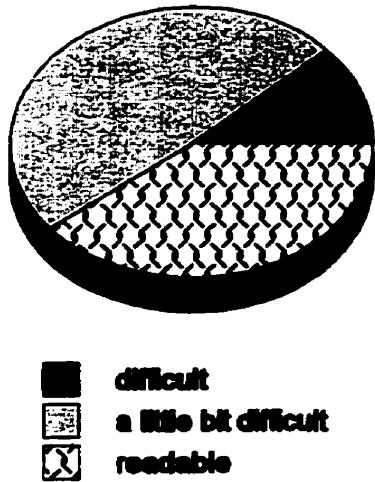


Figure 5. The survey result for the Asian Students.

## The Other Students



Figure 6. The survey result for the other students.

of whether students have some difficulty in reading teachers' handwriting, then the sum of the survey result from these categories should be considered. In other words, the survey indicates that almost two thirds of the Asian students expressed that they had some difficulty reading teachers hand writing.

### **3. Summary**

The results of classroom observation reveal that there were a range of sub-components making up the structure of the freewriting activity in the classroom. Figure 1 shows that the sub-components (sub-activities) may have sequential relationships with each other and hierarchical relationships with the overall freewriting activity. In addition, the ways of implementing each sub-activity were flexible and varied according to different teachers and different times.

Through the data analysis, by constant comparison of categories from the transcription of interviews with students, two kinds of relationships of freewriting sub-activities emerged, and different responses to the different implementations became evident. Furthermore, a few underlying themes were discovered such as the relations of the freewriting activity to the overall process writing class, factors involved in students' perceptions of the benefits of each sub-activity, and the dynamic nature of students' perceptions. Detailed discussion on these issues are presented in the following chapter.

## Chapter Five

### Discussion and Implications

Kantor (1984) stated that teaching writing in an educational context is a multi-dimensional phenomenon in which a variety of interactions occur among a large number of variables, and composition research should account for its complexity. Such complexity was revealed in the students' perceptions described in the previous chapter when freewriting is adopted as an activity in ESL classrooms (that is, freewriting in practice), where it became apparent that the classroom decision making process becomes much more complicated than the straight-forward implementation implied in the literature. Thus, to be able to make claims about freewriting in practice, it is necessary to examine how it is different from freewriting in theory, and what is involved in the context of the freewriting activity.

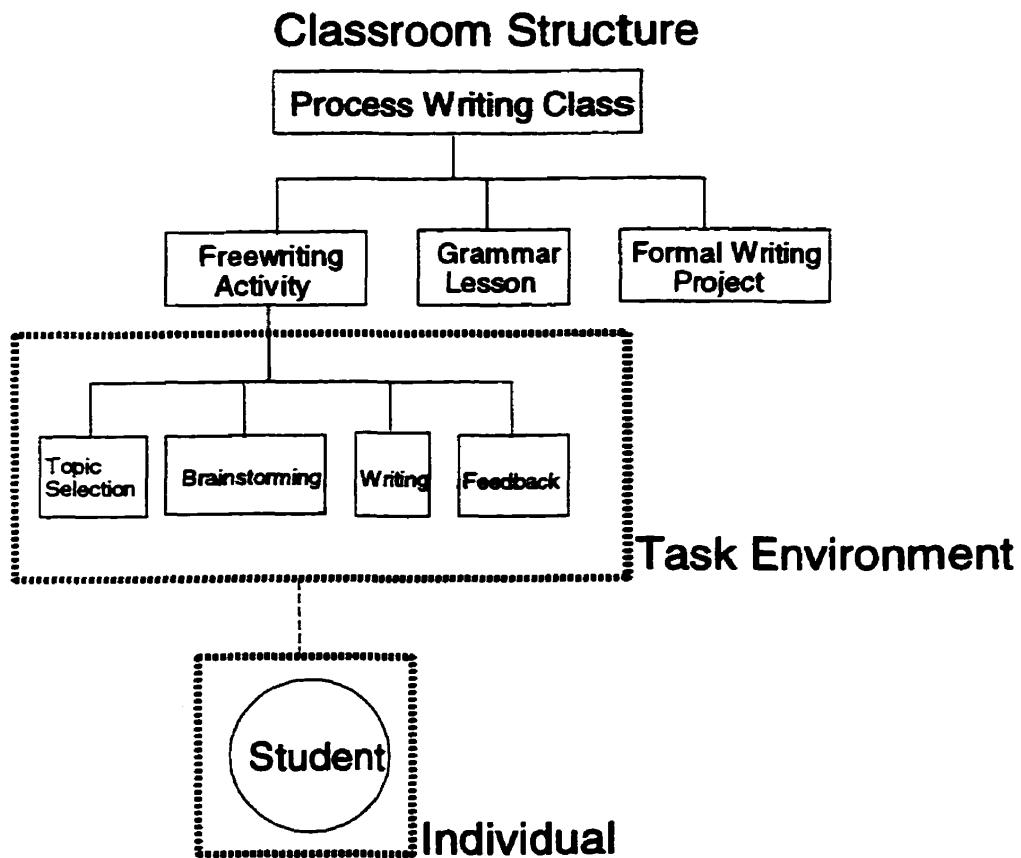
First, when freewriting is brought into practice (in the present context, it is used as a classroom activity), its environment is the classroom, i.e. the structure of the writing classroom is the context within which the activity occurs. Woods (1996) stressed that each component of every classroom event has its own function, that the events are inter-related in a sequential and hierarchical manner within that structure. From this perspective, freewriting in the structure of the class has a range of sub-components, (sub-activities of the freewriting activity in the context of the present study), whereby the sub-activities have their own functions and inter-relationships with the freewriting activity within the structure. It is these relations which need to be examined to understand the

freewriting activity in the classroom, that is, freewriting in practice.

The present study discusses the sequential and hierarchical relationships in the structure of the freewriting activity primarily based on the eight students' perceptions. Therefore, it may be crucial to understand how the students' perceptions have been constructed. Hayes' (1996) model explains the cognitive, affective, social, and physical conditions of the individual in writing, by looking at the interaction between the task environment and the individual writer. In particular, one of the individual aspects - motivation and affect - shows "ample evidence that motivation and affect play central roles in writing processes (p.5)." Borrowing his framework, in the context of the present study, the individual writer refers to the student, and the task environment to the sub-activities and the procedures of implementation of the freewriting activity, i.e. the factors influencing the writing task which are external to the student. Hayes' framework is expected to provide information on how the sub-activities (making up the task environment) and the ways in which they are implemented in the classrooms influence the cognitive, affective, social and physical conditions of the individual students, and what role the students' motivation and affect play in their freewriting activity.

In this chapter, based on the findings from the research, I discuss the freewriting activity in the three process writing classrooms, that is, freewriting in practice, by examining the relationships of the components of the freewriting activity within the structure through the students' perceptions. Then, based on the same structure, an attempt is made to examine the functions of the freewriting activity in the overall process writing class, in order to attain insight into how the freewriting activity fits into the overall

process writing class. Then, in light of this discussion, an attempt is made to understand the eight students' perceptions of the sub-activities of the freewriting activity, being aware of their cognitive, affective, social and physical conditions in their



**Figure 7.** Understanding Freewriting in Practice

freewriting activity. The framework of this discussion is illustrated in Figure 7, which attempts to understand freewriting in practice based on students' perceptions, adapting Woods'(1996) theory for explaining the structure of the freewriting activity, and Hayes(1996) framework for understanding the views of the student towards the

freewriting activity. Finally, the implications for freewriting instruction and classroom research are presented.

## **1. Discussion**

### **1.1. The relationships among the components of the freewriting activity**

#### **1.1.1. Sequential relationships**

The structure of a freewriting activity described in Figure 1 shows that the four sub-activities are at the same hierarchical level but they are related to each other sequentially, that is, one occurs before or after the other during the class. For example, there is a sequential relationship between topic selection and brainstorming because in freewriting the topic selected for the log of the day is carried out before brainstorming. After brainstorming, the actual writing period proceeds, followed by the feedback period after the logs are handed in. The submitted logs are then returned to the students with feedback usually in the next class. There is no deviation from the sequential relationships of the sub-activities observed in this study. The order of occurrence of the sub-activities were topic selection, brainstorming, writing time, and finally feedback as shown in Figure 2.

Based on the sequential relationships in the structure, preceding activities influence the subsequent activity, and could have either beneficial or harmful effects. In light of this, it is important, when we wish to assess the effectiveness of a teaching procedure such as freewriting, to examine these relationships. For example, before the actual writing period, there is the pre-freewriting activity which is composed of the topic selection and

brainstorming sub-activities. If the students have a good topic to motivate themselves with productive idea generation, through the pre-freewriting activities, then, they enjoy the writing exercise and produce good quantity and quality of writing. Dong-keun explained that how much he could write in freewriting depends on the topic of the day, since if the topic was interesting to him, he could write a lot. Reiko pointed out that when she thought a topic was not good, the log she wrote was not good either. Reiko also indicated that brainstorming was good preparation for log writing, which helped her to think about how to write the log, and get into the writing period immediately. Such students' perceptions reflect that the pre-freewriting sub-activities (topic selection and brainstorming) sequentially influence the next sub-activity, actual writing, in terms of the quantity and quality of the students' writing.

The sequential relationships of the sub-activities also suggest that the subsequent sub-activity can provide an opportunity to reinforce the preceding sub-activity. The function of the pre-freewriting activities is to motivate students to write with many relevant ideas on a topic, and to have them ready to put ideas down on paper. When a topic selected does not stimulate students to come up with specific ideas to write about, then, through brainstorming on the selected topic the students may still be able to compensate and get ideas from peers during group discussions. Tomoko claimed that she could get ideas when her group member said something, therefore, she noticed the benefits of brainstorming. Also, as Reiko pointed out, a teacher's clustering on a blackboard to collect all groups' ideas after the group discussion can be another method of getting ideas for the students who did not have a good group brainstorming. In this way, a subsequent

sub-activity such as brainstorming (or clustering by a teacher) can compensate for a preceding sub-activity such as topic selection (or brainstorming in groups) which has failed to benefit students.

### **1.1.2. Hierarchical relationships**

According to the structure in Figure 1, all of the sub-activities are connected to the freewriting activity at a subordinate level, which implies that all of them play a role in the success of the activity. In other words, they may have a certain degree of influence on the goal of the freewriting activity - to have students see the beneficial effects of the writing exercises, such as to enhance learners' writing fluency, to build up their confidence as writers by overcoming apprehension toward English composition, and also to generate and develop ideas and inner thoughts of the learners. Such influences of the sub-activities on the benefits of freewriting is demonstrated by the fact that the students in this study attributed their beliefs of the benefits of the freewriting activity to some aspects of the sub-activities. The next few paragraphs present examples of how beneficial effects (writing fluency and building confidence) are attributed to the perceived hierarchical relationships of the sub-activities and the freewriting activity.

#### *The influence of teacher feedback and timed writing on increasing writing fluency:*

One of the goals of the freewriting activity is to enhance students' writing fluency. To accomplish this, students' statements imply that there are two aspects that come along

with the freewriting activity: to keep doing freewriting regularly (as it is done usually twice a week in each class in the writing classrooms) which is encouraged by teacher feedback, and to limit the writing time in the classroom. Reiko reflected that freewriting as homework (with no time limit imposed) assigned in another class was not as efficient as when it is a classroom activity in the writing classroom, in terms of the speed and the length of her composition. This corresponds to Elbow's (1973) argument that sitting and writing in the same classroom with others gives students a feeling of community, which influences their participation in the task at hand. In addition, when a time limit is imposed on the freewriting activity the speed and quantity of students' freewriting is increased.

*The role of teacher feedback on building confidence:*

The students' statements suggest that teacher feedback has a powerful impact on reducing students' apprehension toward composition and building their confidence as writers. Students reflected that they did not worry about spelling, grammar and structure in their writing because there was no error correction in teacher feedback, and felt comfortable when reading the teacher's comments on their logs. In addition, it was observed that the teachers sometimes made complimentary comments on the general quality of student writing, and that seemed to be a powerful factor to make students feel confident with their writing, although there was a worry not to make the comments superficial by giving too much praise. Praise should not be given too often or sounds superficial.

*The role of pre-freewriting activities on writing confidence:*

Another way that the students gained confidence with their writing was by seeing the length of their logs get longer and the sentences become more complex. Reiko and Dong-keun explained how they realized the development of their writing skill through the freewriting activity as below:

Interviewer: How can you explain your writing has improved? How do you judge your writing is better than before?

Reiko: First of all, the length of my log, it's getting longer...

Dong-keun: ... she [Teacher A] has always told us to write as much as we can within 15 minutes. No worry about the quality of writing. Actually I could not understand it very well at the beginning. But once after I got used to freewriting, I saw my log was getting longer, and that made me feel good...

However, some participants attributed whether they could write a good log (which is long log according to Reiko and Dong-keun's opinions) to what kind of topic they had. For example, Reiko claimed:

Interviewer: What do you think the effect of freewriting activities on the whole writing skill? Do you see any positive effect to improve your overall writing skill?

Reiko: Yeah, it depends on the topic. If I feel that it is a very good topic, then I can write many... and I feel like I want to write a good log. But if it is not a good topic, my log becomes just like scribbling, like a diary.

The student judged what a good topic is for them, as illustrated earlier, by how many ideas they could have to write about the topic. In order to write a long log (which eventually makes the students feel confident in their writing) within a limited time, students need to

have many ideas either from a topic which stimulates their writing or through brainstorming. Students indicated that a topic which they could relate to in their experience enabled them to write more. Thus, it seems that the role of pre-freewriting activities in giving students confidence in their freewriting is by providing many ideas, so that they know what to write about.

### **1.1.3. Summary**

In summary, we can see from the students' comments the interrelationships among the sub-components of the freewriting activity and the goals of the course. Selecting a topic which relates to personal experience and stimulates specific ideas is very important for the students to increase writing fluency and to develop idea generation through freewriting activities, since that makes them able to produce a long composition with a lot of ideas. Further, producing a longer composition within a limited time leads the student to feel confident in their English writing. For better idea generation, introducing a topic with a visual or audio material, and brainstorming on a selected topic are useful. Teacher feedback plays an important role in practicing freewriting regularly (which is related to writing fluency). In addition, no error correction in teacher feedback helps to reduce writing apprehension and makes the students feel comfortable with the next log writing. Teachers' complimentary comments have a great influence on gaining confidence, in that sense students believe in the efficacy of freewriting activities.

The examination of inter-relationships among the sub-activities and their influences on the benefits of the activity, based on students' perceptions, explains how the

students came to see the beneficial effects of the activity. Appreciation of this process can, eventually, give us specific ideas how to improve the instruction of freewriting activities by learning how to optimize the various factors in ESL contexts.

### **1.2. The relationships of the freewriting activity to other components of the process writing class**

This section aims to discuss what the functions are of the freewriting activity in the context of the process writing class in order to provide insight into how the freewriting activity fits into the overall process writing classroom. Having looked at functions of the sub-activities and how the functions relate to other sub-activities in the class, I would like to view this discussion of the relationship of freewriting to the process writing class from Woods' (1996) perspective of classroom structure. According to the structure of the writing classroom (see Figure 1), the freewriting activity is one of the major subordinate nodes, along with a grammar lesson and a formal writing project such as an argumentative essay, of the process writing class. Therefore, the freewriting activity may have a sequential relationship with the other two major activities and a hierarchical relationship with the overall process writing class. In other words, as discussed in the previous sections, the classroom activities (which are the subordinate components of the writing class) may be able to re-enforce each other in the sequential relationship, and through the hierarchical relationship, the freewriting activity can influence the overall success of the writing class. However, as noted in the findings of research question 2, the placement of

a classroom activity is a decision made by a teacher, so that they are not in a fixed order, and the subordinated nodes of the process writing class are not necessarily sequentially related. However, the hierarchical relationship of freewriting as a subordinate node to the overall class is still present. I will term this relationship of one node with another node at the same level of hierarchy (but not necessarily sequentially related) as a *lateral* relationship.

To examine the functions of freewriting to the other activities and the overall writing class, it may be valuable to look at students' comments to ascertain how the freewriting activity has influenced them with respect to other activities in the same class. The following section presents a discussion on what the functions of the freewriting activity are in the three classrooms, through examining the lateral and hierarchical relationships within the classroom structure.

### 1.2.1. Lateral relationships

Vanett and Jurich (1990) suggested that personal journal writing provides students with the opportunity to build their confidence as writers while they develop skills which can be applied to other kinds of writing. Some of the comments made by the participants revealed that there are some relations between the freewriting activity and the other activities in the writing classroom. For example, freewriting provides a place for students to use new information they acquired in other classroom activities, to apply this new knowledge and improve the quality of their logs. The following statements by Tomoko explain what she learned through the freewriting activities and how she applied a variety

of writing strategies learned from other activities (grammar lesson and formal writing project) from other writing tasks to her log writing.

Tomoko: ... first, I write anything I feel like to, and then, I learn how to write an essay Then I try to use the strategies on a log. So, the log improved. Then, at that time, the teacher gave us this big assignment. I think her way to teach is very good. First of all we learned it like a diary. Then we started to write a draft, then during the draft #1, #2, #3, at that time we learned grammar, so we can use all these stuffs for a log. Then a log will improve and also draft #1, #2... will improve. Then my log is getting better, because I learned how to write an argumentative essay focusing on one point.

According to Tomoko's statement above, freewriting plays an important role in its relations to a grammar lesson activity and a formal writing project. Whatever she learned related to writing strategies (e.g. grammatical knowledge from a grammar lesson and coherent content from a formal writing lesson), she spontaneously tried to apply to her log writing. More students articulated that they used log writing as a place where they applied new knowledge learned in other activities in the process writing class, in particular, structure and grammar.

Jin-woo: We had a lesson on 'six-w' [when, where, who, what, how and why] to know how to describe the content more specifically. I try to apply this principle to my log...

Interviewer: When freewriting, are you aware of grammatical rules?  
 Reiko: Hmm... recently, yes. The first logs, at that time I didn't think about grammar recently, since we learned a lot about grammar, like who, where or something like adjective clause. I want to use it in a log, so I am trying to use it...

Since freewriting is not evaluated at all, adult ESL students feel free to practice grammar

or structure, whatever they learned from other activities even without teacher instruction. As Wiley Sandler (1987) pointed out, informal expressive writing functions as stimulus to help students experiment and discover their understanding of what they have studied.

Raimes (1983) stated that through freewriting activities, the students come to understand what they put down first on paper is not their finished work, and thereby get to know what the draft is, which is one of the important elements in process writing. A perspective similar to Raimes' (1983) has been discussed for dialogue journal writing as an ESL learning strategy to support the writing process (Holmes & Moulton, 1997). The following comments made by Reiko corroborates this function of the freewriting activity, since she articulated her idea of the benefits of the freewriting activity, in that she could practice how to write a draft for the process of formal writing:

Interviewer: Can you imagine what you would have missed if you didn't have log writing?

Reiko: I would have needed more time for drafts. But I wrote a lot of logs, so my brain is ready for something.

Yeah, I think it's good practice.

Interviewer: What do you mean by that you are ready to write?

Reiko: Um... argumentative essay is more difficult style, more formal. I think if I didn't know how to write a log, then how can I know how to write a draft. So, I mean it's very basic step...

### 1.2.2. Hierarchical relationships

The freewriting activity influences the success of the process writing class, in that students can accomplish some of the goals of the writing class, such as increasing fluency

of their writing and confidence in their English writing.

The freewriting activity provides a place for students to apply their knowledge of English writing, which is especially meaningful for students who rarely had a chance to express their feelings in the written form of English. Traditionally, many language classes have not taken much time for the actual writing activity because evaluating students' written work has been regarded as exhausting and time consuming for writing teachers (Graves, 1978). In these traditional English classes there was rarely an English composition opportunity for students either as a form of class activity or as an assignment, except for simple dictation drills. In other words, in the traditional curriculum there is not much time allocated for students' practicing writing. Accordingly, students became unfamiliar with and afraid of expressing their own ideas in written form. Therefore, ungraded writing practice like freewriting may be a good way to encourage and motivate students to develop their writing skills in an unthreatening way.

Hayes (1996) stated that through increased writing experience, writers may acquire more effective writing strategies and more techniques to refine their writing, and thus, writing practice is essential. Reiko expressed her realization that through the freewriting activity to improve writing competence, it is necessary to practice writing as much as possible.

Interviewer: What kind of things have you learned through the freewriting activity?

Reiko: I learned from freewriting, if I want to write down some essay easily, I should write a lot. Writing is practice, so more we write a lot, more easy we can write. That's what I learned. I think my writing is getting better.

As shown in Reiko's anecdotal evidence, a lot of writing practice provided by the freewriting activity seems to be a crucial component for improving the general quality of students' writing in the process writing classroom.

### 1.2.3. Summary

Vanett and Jurich (1990) stressed that personal journal writing can function as a way into the writing process and as an opportunity to develop and practice skills used for other writing tasks. The students' perceptions in this study reflected that freewriting is clearly multi-functional in relation to re-enforcing other activities in the writing class, and in terms of applying skills learned in other classroom activities in an unthreatening forum. In this way students build confidence and writing fluency through regular repetition of writing- practicing writing, which does not seem to be emphasized in traditional curricula.

According to the description of the ESL program, presented by Magahay and Woods (1990):

"The writing process component provides learners with the opportunity to improve the products they write, through increasing their awareness of the processes that underlie writing..... the goal is to foster in each learner the confidence and ability to adapt those phases to their own particular styles and purposes for writing." (p.3)

Freewriting serves many of the functions of the process writing class, and thus it plays an important role in the overall goals of the process writing class.

### **1.3. The students' perceptions of the freewriting sub-activities**

As mentioned earlier, this section aims to understand the eight students' perceptions of the freewriting sub-activities and their implementation in their classrooms, by examining the factors that influenced the formation of their opinions. (Students' perceptions of the freewriting sub-activities obtained from the interviews were presented in Chapter Four). Hayes' model is used as a guide in this section to understand student perceptions because implicit in the model is the interaction of the individual and the task environment.

#### **1.3.1. Topic selection**

The interaction between the students and the topic selection sub-activity seemed to relate to the students' background, goals, and motivation. When the students perceived what a "good" topic was for them, their education background and personal experience were factors that influenced their opinions. Also, the students perceived topic introduction in a positive light when pictures were used, it seemed that the visual-spatial representation increased their motivation to write, as Hayes (1996) noted.

The function of topic selection in freewriting is to provide an interesting and motivating topic which allows students to express themselves freely, thereby enhancing their fluency. To encourage students to write freely on whatever they want, freely-chosen topics have been suggested to help student writers. Some researchers argue that assigned topics do not motivate students to write as effectively as they do with their own topics (Edelsky & Smith, 1984), and give them less control over the meaning of the texts in their

composition (Kamler, 1992).

According to the data collected in this study, however, in light of the education background of the students and their goal of study, teacher assigned topics seemed to be more appropriate for these adult ESL students than free-chosen topics. This is suggested by the fact that the students showed preference for assigned topics, and actually most of the time, they used the given topics for their log writing even though they could choose any topic they wanted. It seems to be the case that their prior experience of learning writing has been strongly influenced by a form-dominated approach which focuses on grammatical accuracy and organization, and in these classrooms topics are assigned by the teacher. All of the students in this study have experienced teacher-dominated classes through their schooling (from elementary to junior high school), and have the expectation that the teacher should provide topics for writing assignments. For example, Tomoko, who had been taking the writing program for the second time reflected that she did not like her previous writing teacher's directions of not assigning a specific topic, because she did not know what to write. Also, as in Yun-hee's case, ESL students whose goals are to pass the test of writing in English (TWE) or other English exams may find the fact that they should respond to an assigned topic in written form more useful for preparing for these tests.

The comments made by the participants in my study leads us to realize that the factor in the success of topic selection is what is a "good" assigned topic for these students. Some students reflected that "good" topics are ones that give them many specific and concrete ideas to write about, especially in relation to their life and

background knowledge. Dong-keun remembered the phrase, 'Dead Tree,' as a bad topic for his log writing because of its too abstract notion, while another word, 'Freedom' was good for him, in the sense that he could relate the word to the situation in his country. Although the word, 'Freedom,' might be a too abstract word for other students, Dong-keun's preference toward the word for the writing topic corresponds to Vanett and Jurich (1990)'s beliefs that when a topic is related to the students' personal experiences, they do not have to worry about finding information and are rarely blocked by not knowing what to write. However, it may be difficult for the ESL teachers to select a topic which is related to the students' personal experience, because they come from diverse backgrounds. For example, the word, 'Freedom', might have been too abstract for other students who came from a different country than Dong-keun. Therefore, allowing the possibility of an assigned and a free-chosen topic seems the best compromise as the writing teachers in this study recognized.

There is another way, in addition to topic selection, to stimulate students' idea generation as a means of providing a "good" topic, by different methods of representing the topics, which may be a way to compensate for topics that are too abstract and have no representation in the students' mind. Hayes (1996) emphasized the importance of visual-spatial representations such as using graphs, tables, or pictures, for understanding the message of the text. His model implies that such visual representation influences a writer's motivation as well as affects cognitive processes that allows them to understand the notion represented. Many students spoke about the benefit of the pictures shown as topics, since it captivated their attention and gave them more inspiration for their writing.

Thus, it is not only the choice of topic that seems to play a role but also the manner in which the topic is presented to the students.

### **1.3.2. Brainstorming**

In general, the participants felt that the brainstorming activity was advantageous before the actual freewriting period, in that they found more ideas from their collaborators in the activity. Students' comments corroborate the beneficial functions of brainstorming advocated by Raimes (1983) and Czerniewska (1992) that this technique through speaking and listening to others encourages students to find their own ideas about a given topic, through speaking and listening to others. It also supports the student writers' struggling for content in their writing. Hayes (1996) also stated that spoken language can offer useful inputs to the writing process in terms of adding content information.

However, the success of brainstorming depends on whether the students actually participated in the activity. In group discussion, there is a possibility of having an unproductive group session, since, as Tomoko and Reiko pointed out, not every student is sincere and active in the group work. If a couple of the members do not participate in the group discussion, then the "flow" of ideas in the group is disturbed, and the others who are active in the activity get de-motivated. This supports Hayes' (1996) notion that the collaborators in the social environment is one of the aspects that affect motivation of the individual students. Another way of brainstorming, which is led by a teacher, has the possibility to make up for such problems of group work for the sake of the students that are distracted from their work by their inactive peers during the discussion. This is

inferred from Reiko's statement that she could know the other groups' ideas when a teacher wrote down all groups' ideas on a blackboard. (Such a sort of re-brainstorming activity does not always have the power to get attention from all of the students all of the time.) Here, as I noticed as a participant in the group discussion in one of the writing classrooms, if the teacher uses a special technique with a visual effect, such as clustering, the students' attention and motivation seem to be increased, and consequently, the positive function of the brainstorming is increased, as they get more ideas for their writing. Using clustering also corroborates Hayes' framework since, as noted earlier, visual-spatial stimuli increase students' understanding of the message of the text.

### **1.3.3. Freewriting**

*Timed writing:*

Students comments revealed that timing for freewriting plays a positive role in increasing writing fluency as well as writing speed. The fact that the time for writing is limited makes students concentrate more on their writing and participate in the activity more actively. As Brousseau (1996) reported, this timed classroom activity has the power to stimulate students' thinking and produce something on paper in a short time. This positive effect of timing can be explained by borrowing a notion from psychology, the idea of "facilitative anxiety" (as opposed to "debilitative anxiety" where the anxiety produces a negative effect, decreasing students' ability to communicate by decreasing their confidence) which some researchers believe to be useful in keeping students alert (Brown, 1987; Oxford & Ehrman, 1993) and providing enough tension to complete the writing .

In fact, this is reflected in Tomoko's statement that freewriting in the classroom was more effective than the one she did as a homework when there is no time limit involved. In my findings there is anecdotal evidence that students perceive a time limit in freewriting as beneficial.

Also, timed writing was perceived as beneficial, when a student had a goal to pass an English writing exam. Yun-hee reflected that practice writing within a limited time was useful for her to increase the speed of her writing, since it met her need to prepare for the test of English.

*The length of the time for freewriting:*

On the other hand, some students' comments reflected that the appropriateness of the length of the time (15-20 min) for freewriting also needs to be examined since the length of writing time may be too short (causing "debilitative anxiety"). Although the usual time limit in the three writing classes was longer than the ten to fifteen minute time period originally suggested by Elbow (1973), Jin-woo and Reiko expressed that the time limit was still too short for them. It is noticeable that Reiko showed the possibility of having stress because of not having enough time for her freewriting, and that she evaluated herself a slower writer than her peers. The optimum length for the time limit imposed on freewriting should be determined so that the writing time is not too long to maintain the students' "facilitative anxiety" but balanced by the fact that the writing time is not too short for students' to remain motivated and have self-esteem. In this way, students will remain focused on the activity so that students of different levels of proficiency in

English writing in an ESL classroom feel comfortable with freewriting in the classroom.

The goal of the optimum time is to reach what Allwright and Bailey (1991) call “relaxed concentration”, the state of being of the language learner where they have “facilitating anxiety” but not “debilitating anxiety”.

As stated above to maintain a state of “relaxed concentration” during the freewriting task in the ESL classrooms, it is necessary to make the time the optimum time for individual students. Obviously for individual students to write for different lengths of time in the classroom is not practically feasible, since it requires teachers to keep very careful track of time and to delegate students to stop writing when their individual time limit has been reached. Organized individual time limits also serve to increase students “debilitative anxiety” because it singles out students who are slower in writing in the perception of their peers, which decreases their confidence. Reiko has commented that the time to write was too short for her but not for other students, as a result of this she has evaluated herself as a slow writer. So it is not possible or advisable to implement individual time limits. Probably, this can be handled by a classroom teacher’s moment-by-moment decision based on sensitivity toward individual students. For example, when collecting the students’ finished logs, a teacher may be able to allow a few more minutes to the students who have not finished their freewriting. In this way, if a short time limit is imposed on their freewriting, the teacher can reduce the possibility of some students’ feeling “debilitative anxiety.”

#### 1.3.4. Feedback

While Elbow (1973) stipulated providing no feedback on student freewriting, the three teachers in the context of the present study offered feedback each time, and returned it to their students the next class. According to students' comments on feedback from a teacher, the types of teacher feedback can be divided into two: comments on content and ideas, and complimentary comments on the general quality of composition or sentence-level structural features. Most teachers' feedback was a response to the content and ideas of students' composition, and comments on the structural features of sentences or evaluation of writing quality were very rare. Students perceptions reflected the different effects of different types of teacher feedback because, seemingly, different types of feedback interacted differently with their motivation, backgrounds, and goals in writing.

Students' comments on their teachers' feedback show that the function of the comments on content and ideas is different from the function of complimentary comments on the quality of composition or structural sentences. In addition, when teachers give frequent complimentary comments, the students may not always perceive it positively. In fact, the policy of no error correction seemed to bring conflict between the teachers and the students, because the policy did not correspond directly to the students' learning background and goals of studying English. It was also found that some of the students had difficulty in reading a teacher' comments on their logs, because for them the teachers handwriting was illegible. These issues will be discussed in more detail in the next sections.

### **The effects of teacher feedback in freewriting**

#### *Comments on content and ideas:*

It was observed that comments on content and ideas of students' logs was the most common type of feedback adopted by the three writing teachers. Besides the function of reinforcement (as described above), students' perceptions implied that comments on content by a teacher might help build confidence and generate more ideas. Jin-woo and Yun-hee realized that they did not have to worry about correctness in their composition when there were only comments on content from their teacher , and accordingly, they became more comfortable with freewriting. It seemed that because the students had been accustomed to form-focused teaching in their prior experience, they did not believe that the teacher would practice the no error correction policy until they received feedback only on content and their ideas. This supports the possibility of using the no error correction aspect of freewriting for reducing students' writing apprehension, and motivating them to express their ideas freely in spite of the fact that many students at the beginning of the program are vociferous in their criticism of this practice. (This will be discussed later in this chapter - the section of 'Dynamic nature of students' perceptions on error correction.')

In addition, as Faigley, Daly and Witte (1981) claimed, when the students become low-apprehensive, they may develop more ideas and produce longer essays than when they have higher anxiety. Students expressed that from the questions, sympathy, and comments from a teacher, they become interested in talking about their stories and thoughts. Also, as Tae-soo's case, students can use teacher comments on content of their

writing by knowing whether their English writing was comprehensible to a teacher. Since the comments by the teacher did not correspond to what Tae-soo wrote, it indicated to him that his writing is incomprehensible. In this regard, the function of feedback is not only to provide reinforcement, but also to provide information which can be useful for modification of learners' behaviors in a cognitive view of learning (Chaudron, 1988).

*Complimentary comments on the general quality of writing or sentence-level structural features:*

As mentioned earlier (see Chapter Four), teachers' complimentary comments on the overall quality or the correctness of sentence-level structure of students' composition were rare occurrences in students' logs. However, when such complimentary comments occur, they seemed to have directly affected students to become highly motivated and more confident with their freewriting, such as the cases of Yun-hee and Jin-woo. Interestingly, the complimentary comments pointed out by students during the interviews were only related to the general quality of writing and sentence-level structure features, not content. It remains to be seen what the effect will be of teachers' complimentary response to content, on increasing students' motivation and confidence<sup>5</sup>.

On the other hand, it may not always be good to give complimentary comments on students' logs. The uselessness of repeating compliments in teacher feedback on student

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It should be mentioned that there were no complimentary comments on content. This may not only be because there was no such feedback, rather this may be because the students did not deem these comments important.

writing was shown in Yun-hee's statements (see Chapter Four) where she complained of too many complimentary comments by teachers in a previous ESL school where she attended, which came across to her as superficial. It is important to be aware of Yun-hee's negative reaction to positive comments, when encouragement and praise is usually regarded as very beneficial for students' learning.

Given such various reactions of students to teachers' comments, giving feedback on student writing is a complex job for writing teachers, since giving too little complimentary comments may fail to inspire confidence, and giving too much complimentary comments will give the impression of superficiality. However, it needs to be noted that students are very sensitive to a teacher's brief response to their composition.

### **Difficulty in reading handwriting on teacher comment**

Some of the students' comments revealed that there were some factors that affected whether the ESL students read teachers' comments on their logs, as illustrated in Chapter Four through the statements of Yun-hee and Ho-joon. They both had difficulty in reading their teacher's comment thoroughly, which led them sometimes to fail to appreciate the teachers feedback. A survey was conducted questioning the magnitude of the difficulty for other ESL students in reading their teachers' handwriting, and revealed that this could be a particular problem for students who are not familiar with the Roman alphabet. This suggests that the main cause of the reading difficulty is the cursive handwriting of the Roman alphabet rather than a teacher's "bad handwriting." In that

case, even very neat cursive handwriting would be difficult for these students to recognize readily the English letters. The result of the survey implies that if the teacher's handwriting is adapted to be simpler and less cursive (such as block letters), it would be much easier for the students to read the teacher's comment and understand the purpose of the feedback.

Teachers A and B reflected that the ultimate purpose of their responses to students' logs is to encourage the students to write with more complex ideas, to push them to develop their language using longer sentences, and to let students learn how to distance themselves from their writing so that they may look at it objectively, to give a critique, and to be able to read critically. If the teacher's intention is to convey the importance of focusing on the content in freewriting through their comments, it is important that these comments be comprehensible for the students. The notion of "modification" of handwriting can be given a more serious theoretical significance by braiding it within the framework of modification of input and "*foreigner talk*."

Such consideration for non-native speakers of the target language have been discussed in the field of second language acquisition (SLA). Specifically, research on conversation between native speakers and non-native speakers suggests that linguistic input has to be comprehensible to the learner if it is to serve as data for second language acquisition, and the speech modifications of native speakers as input almost certainly help (Long, 1983). Input modifications have been investigated through the study of *foreigner talk*, which refers to how native speakers modify the way they speak to non-native speakers for communication (Ellis, 1994). The types of modification of the native

speakers' normal speech are various, including simplification in syntax and lexical items, adjusting the tempo of speech to non-native speakers, and articulating the sounds more clearly (Ellis, 1997). Ellis (1994) suggested that such types of modification help to make the meanings of utterances more transparent, thereby learners' comprehension enhances.

It is interesting to note that there is parallel to spoken *foreigner talk* in the teachers' written comments. Native speakers' "fast speech" to language learners may sound unclear, because adjacent sounds (consonants and vowels) are not articulated distinctively, and as a result, the sentence uttered becomes incomprehensible to the learners. Written texts undergo a similar transformation by a native writer in "fast writing", in the same way as the words are in "fast speech", the letters are concatenated and the combination in the handwriting can make it difficult to distinguish individual letters. It seems desirable that such modification as foreigner talk should be considered in the context of second language writing. The suggested modification would be to impose *foreigner writing* (*written foreigner talk*), which includes less variation in letter formation (the correspondence to articulation in speech). For example, the written text could be modified by using clearer handwriting (e.g. in general, block letters seem to be easily recognized) when corresponding with foreigners than the one normally used for the handwritten messages with native speakers (e.g. cursive style of handwriting). In particular, the result of the survey implies that this modification of native speakers' handwriting may be more needed for the students whose native language alphabet is completely different from the Roman alphabet. In the ESL writing context, teacher feedback is the place where the teacher communicates with students, intending to deliver

a pedagogical message. When the purpose of feedback is to communicate with non-native learners, focusing on the content, to represent the teacher's message in clear written form would be essential in enhancement of students' comprehension of the message.

In light of the goals of freewriting in the context of the present study, teachers' comments on student freewriting seem to be a crucial key to help students focus on the content and develop ideas through the message of the comments. Since some of the students in this context reflected that teachers' illegible handwriting led them not to read the teachers' comments carefully, such difficulty of the students in reading teachers' handwriting should not be ignored, especially for those from countries where the Roman alphabet is not used in their first language. One might argue, it would gradually become less difficult to read a teacher's response as the students became more accustomed to reading their teacher's handwriting (in the same way that students learn to understand "fast speech"). However, most ESL programs are scheduled for two to three months, and by the time students get used to a teacher's handwriting, the term will likely be near its end. The function of teacher feedback on students' freewriting mentioned above might be sabotaged by the incomprehensibility of the letters in a teacher's handwriting. In this regard, the modification of the teacher's normal handwriting needs to be taken into account in order to make the meaning of the written message more transparent and comprehensible for the students.

### **1.3.5. Dynamic nature of students' perceptions**

It seems that students' perceptions are naturally dynamic, which implies that

education can contribute to developing their prior perspectives to be able to view the benefits of teaching events. We see often that implementation of new theory often brings conflict between the teachers who implement the new idea and the students who are not used to the new idea. In the context of the present study, there appeared such a conflict between the teachers and the students regarding what to focus on in freewriting, and the value of error correction. The students' disagreement with teachers' beliefs on their teaching seemed derived from the students expectation toward the teacher's role in their learning, which was influenced by their prior educational background (that is, form-focused teaching). As Leki and Carson (1994) pointed out ESL students tend to apply their previous learning experience to new situations, the students in this study seemed to have expected their teachers to enhance their grammatical knowledge and to give them error correction in their written product. However, some of the students showed that their perspectives toward the importance of accuracy in composition have been changed through a certain period of practicing freewriting.

As mentioned earlier, teachers A and B never corrected students' errors in their freewriting, and gave some comments to respond to the content, and this type of feedback conflicted with some of the students' expectation of teachers' error correction (such as the cases of Dong-keun and Yun-hee). In particular, this occurs at the beginning of each term when students are not used to freewriting activities yet, or have personal goals to acquire grammatical knowledge, and the students are not satisfied with their teacher's comments just on the content of their composition without error correction. For example, when Yun-hee had been in the program for less than two months, she strongly

complained about having no error correction on her logs from the writing teachers in the program, when she compared the writing class to her prior experience of learning English writing in another ESL writing program. In fact, she was planning to take the TOEFL test and TWE test as well, thus indicating that she had a high desire to gain grammatical knowledge through writing practice.

However, it seems that the disagreement of the students on no error correction can change when the students come to realize that a focus on the formal features in their freewriting is not as important as focusing on developing content with their own ideas. One of the fundamental aspects of students' perception may be that their perceptions are naturally dynamic in the process of learning, and consequently, their perceptions of no error correction can change possibly through understanding the importance of focusing on content rather than accuracy (some students, however, might not act on the idea until later). For instance, when I interviewed Yun-hee about three months after she started the writing program, it seemed that she understood the teachers' beliefs that focusing on meaning is more important than on grammar accuracy in freewriting. When I asked her again about her experience in the previous ESL program, she described the class as follows:

Yun-hee: There (her previous ESL school) was no freewriting like here. Just once a week, not writing about whatever I want like here, I had to correct grammatical errors in my writing. I like freewriting more. I can practice writing many things quickly, lots of my thoughts without concerning grammar. It seems more effective, since I can practice writing many things quickly, then can correct some errors later. A teacher in the previous school sometimes said, "why didn't you correct the errors?", then it

made me hesitate to write the next one. Error correction is okay, but I didn't like to be insisted to correct them. A teacher there did not care about the content of our writing at all, except the usage of vocabulary...

From this statement, it seems that Yun-hee's perceptions of freewriting and the way the teachers give feedback on it has gradually changed. She initially had a strongly negative opinion regarding the lack of error correction from the teacher, suggesting that the teacher's comments on her log had no beneficial effect. In this later statement, however, she seems to think that a teacher should be interested in the content of student's writing rather than just grammatical accuracy, and freewriting is useful for expressing many thoughts without worrying about grammar. Another student, Dong-keun, also showed that his perception of accuracy in writing has gradually changed since the teacher instructed the students not to worry about errors in grammar or vocabulary, because as he continued freewriting he noticed the improvement in his writing:

Dong-keun: Actually, I couldn't understand at the beginning why the teacher has always told us not to worry about grammar and the quality of writing. However, once after I got used to writing fast, I saw that my logs were getting longer, and it made me feel good. Since then, I don't spend a lot of time to think of a right word when I get stuck. I just try to use an easy word or to explain what I want to say in a long sentence. I don't get stressed or feel pressure as much as before that I have to use an exact word or more difficult word in my writing...

Adult ESL students, in particular, who have been used to the teacher-dominated education system like the participants in this study, tend to expect learning explicitly from a teacher. When a teacher returns student logs with feedback, the students expect to

learn something explicitly from the teacher's feedback, such as error correction. However, not only error correction but also comments on content from a teacher can satisfy the students' expectation, in terms of stimulating students' learning curiosity. As illustrated earlier, comments on content without error correction seemed to make students feel decreased apprehension and gain confidence in their writing. In this way, when students notice the merits of feedback on content rather than grammar or sentence structure, their needs may be satisfied to a certain extent by what they expect from a teacher. The students then possibly may not only recognize the value of teachers' comments on content but may "act" on this by accepting the benefits. However, as Hayes (1996) pointed out, learning motivation can occur in long-term predispositions to make students participate in certain types of learning activity. In the context of the present study, the value of focusing on content without error correction in freewriting would be a new idea and an unknown strategy for the students in order to improve the quality of their writing. When the students understand the value of focusing only on content to bring about improvement in their writing, they may be more receptive to the idea.

Given that we understand the dynamic nature of students' perceptions in their learning process as demonstrated so far, it should be noted that research on students' perceptions (or their needs analysis as well) needs to be done based on a longitudinal study to reflect possible changes in students' perceptions. When students do not understand fully the functions and benefits of the activities in the classroom, usually at the beginning of the term of a program, they seem to complain about inefficiency of the education of the program (as in the case of the no error correction policy). Since the occurring time of

understanding and motivation is different from student to student, research on students' perceptions needs to be reinforced by longitudinal follow-up studies.

## **2. Implications**

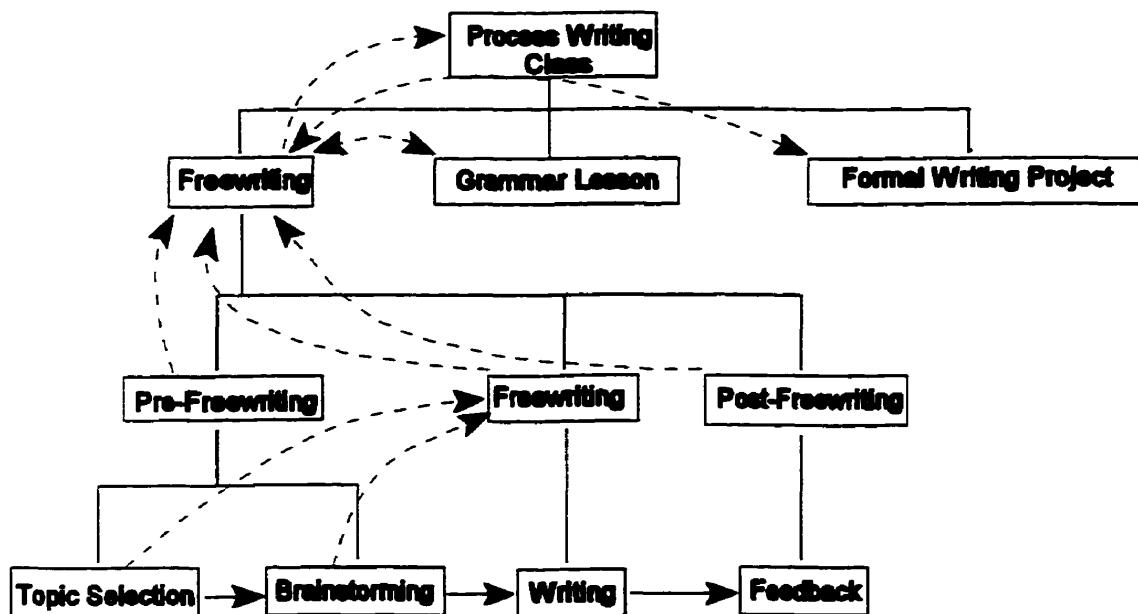
### **2.1. Awareness of the relationships among the components in the classroom structure**

The fundamental goal of the present study was to examine, from the students' perspectives, the sub-components of a freewriting activity and their contribution to the success of the freewriting activity. Figure 8 reflects the relationships between the components of the structure of the freewriting activity based on Figure 1, and further, the contribution of the freewriting activity to the other classroom activities and the overall success of the writing class. The broken lines represent the direction of one component's contribution to the success of the other activity (that is, the direction of the arrow indicates the direction of the beneficial effects).

It would be good for the writing teachers in this context to be aware of the contribution of each component in their implementation of the activities, in the sense of the beneficial effects they bring to other components of the process writing class. The broken lines imply that topic selection and brainstorming components contribute to whether students can produce good freewriting with many ideas; all the components of the freewriting activity (pre-freewriting, freewriting, and post-freewriting) contribute to the success of the freewriting; the freewriting activity seems to have inter-contribution with

the other activities (a grammar lesson and a formal writing project) in the writing class, and consequently, contributes to the overall success of the writing class. In this way students build confidence and writing fluency through regular repetition of writing - practicing which does not seem to be emphasized in traditional curricula.

More importantly, the structure of the writing class implies that when one of the



**Figure 8.** The direction of contribution to the success of the components

sub-activities is not carried out successfully, the super-ordinate activity can still be compensated for by lateral sub-activities. For example, when students were not stimulated by the topic selection activity, they can have an opportunity to get motivated to produce freewriting with the ideas generated through brainstorming; and when the pre-freewriting activities were not successful and students did not produce writing as good as

they could, they can still learn from the feedback activity; and when students did not understand completely on the bases of a formal writing project or a grammar lesson, they may be able to practice the writing skill during the freewriting activity, or the other way around. In this way each activity and sub-activity in the process writing class has the possibility of compensating for the failure of another. In a sense, inherent in this classroom setting is a “fail-safe” mechanism: if a particular sub-activity fails a particular student, then another sub-activity may compensate for the failure. This notion is particularly important in ESL classrooms where a variety of students are present with different perceptions of classroom activities, and so one activity might fail for some students.

## **2.2. Implications for freewriting instruction**

The students' perceptions of the sub-activities for freewriting in the findings suggest that each activity contributes to the students' overall perceptions of freewriting. On the whole, as the students' comments above showed, freewriting seems to have a powerful influence on the ESL students' learning how to write, particularly, in terms of increasing fluency and speed of writing, and confidence as writers by reducing apprehension toward composition in English. It seems that students came to realize the benefits of freewriting, in particular, when they noticed their improvement in freewriting; when they kept freewriting regularly so that they produced a large quantity of logs; and when they understood the priority in their learning process, such as the case of content

before accuracy. It is important that students become aware of the improvements in their learning process. Teachers can facilitate this through appropriate teaching techniques.

### **2.3. Implications for classroom research**

This study shows that how a theoretical concept in the literature can be varied and adapted as a classroom activity, depending on the context, the purpose of the activity, the range of application of the theory, and the ways of implementation by a teacher's decision making. Accordingly, such variations bring each different effect and expectation from what outlined in the literature. In addition, the various backgrounds of the ESL students add even more complexity to the classroom teaching. Therefore, the investigation of a classroom activity should first determine a specific context and the characteristics of the type of an activity involved. To thoroughly represent the determination, it seems effective to examine the structure of the activity and the relationships among the components of the structure. Keeping the relationships in mind, examining students' perceptions offers us a better understanding how the students see the beneficial effects of the activity and what hinders them to see and how. In this way, the result of the research may provide useful information for the writing instruction in the classroom.

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