# Tug of War: The Writing Process of a Bilingual Writer and his Struggles

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## Introduction

"What is involved in the act of writing?" asked researcher Sondra Perl (193). This question ignited a desire in the expansion for the academic study of a writer's composing process. According to Perl, "In recent years, interest in the composing process has grown" (193). Instead of academic researchers investigating simply in order to describe and understand literature, they are analyzing the processes related to composing a piece of writing. Various studies have been done on this subject. For example, Perl conducted "a study of the composing processes of five unskilled college writers" (192). Another researcher, Carol Berkenkotter, "wanted to learn more about the planning and revising strategies of a highly skilled and verbal writer," and decided to focus on Donald M. Murray (219). When Berkenkotter conducted her study, she stated that "[t]o date there are no reported studies of writers composing in natural (as opposed to laboratory) settings that combine thinking-aloud protocols with the writers' own introspective accounts" (219). Her study was the first of its kind.

Both studies analyzed the writing styles of native English writers. In order to contribute to this conversation, I decided to take a different approach and analyze my composing process, since I was taught Portuguese before I learned to speak English. Throughout the years, I have personally struggled with the "tug of war" between both languages when I write: I read information in English, rationalize it in Portuguese, and write it in English. To further investigate this complex process, I have decided to analyze my writing process and compare it to two native English writers: to Tony, the unskilled writer in Perl's study, and to Murray, a highly skilled writer. Also, I analyzed the benefits and disadvantages of how the language barrier affects my writing process. To successfully analyze my writing process, I used the thinking-aloud protocol, since both Tony and Murray used the protocol. The strengths and weakness of this protocol and its effects on my process are addressed later on in this study.

## Methods

Each writer, skilled or unskilled, has a unique composing process. But what are the characteristics in my writing process? In order to acquire credible results, a natural setting was used in order to minimize the negative impacts of conducting a study in a laboratory environment, such as unnatural distractions. I filmed myself in my dorm using the think-aloud protocol proposed by Berkenkotter. The method was simple, consisting of an iPhone 4S to record the video and audio, a laptop as a medium for the composing process, and a timer.

In this study, I decided not to focus on the content, but on the process of constructing an essay. I have applied some of Perl's coding system to my study, but I also took the liberty to expand and personalize it. I created a coding system (see Table 1) to substitute every four to nine words with one or more codes corresponding to what I was doing. Each code was assigned to a category: talking, writing, reading, or distractions. For example, on page three of the transcript, I stated,"Okay, so I'm going to do the introduction." In these eight words, I am talking about what I am going to do ($T_a$) and planning on how to proceed with my essay ($W_{pl}$). After my coding system was in place, I watched the video and coded the script. This helped me decide when I read the book ($R_b$) or if I re-read my text aloud ($T_{re}$), serving as a great aid in finding specific patterns in my writing that I would not have discovered by solely analyzing the script.

| Talking | Writing | Reading | Distractions |
|---|---|---|---|
| $T_r$ – Random | $W_a$ - Adding | $R_w$ - Reading word count | $D_i$ - Distraction |
| $T_a$ - Talking about action | $W_b$ - Writer's block | $R_b$ - Reading the book | $T_x$ - Texting |
| $T_{lt}$ - Losing train of thought | $W_c$ - Citations | $R_s$ – Scanning | $C_a$ - Calling |
| $T_q$ - Questioning | $W_d$ - Deleting | | M- Mumbling |
| $T_{re}$ - Rereading aloud | $W_s$ - Spelling | | |
| $T_t$ - Talking about thought | $W_{lt}$ - Losing train of thought | | |
| $T_w$ - Talking while writing | $W_p$ - Punctuation | | |
| $T_f$ - Speaking Portuguese | $W_r$ - Red Line | | |
| $T_{an}$ - Analyzing Text aloud | $W_{pl}$ - Planning | | |
| $T_{tol}$ - Relating Text to Essay | | | |

**Table 1:** Coding System

Within my writing category, I have codes based on the editing process, such as spelling ($W_s$) and punctuation ($W_p$), and on codes based on the writing itself, such as planning ($W_{pl}$) and writer's block ($W_b$). To clarify, the red line code ($W_r$) refers to the red line that appears under a misspelled word of the Microsoft Word Spelling Check. In regards to the talking category, talking about an action ($T_a$) means stating what I will do, like, for example, "Okay, so I'm going to do the introduction," shows that I was talking about an action (writing the introduction).

| Script | Codes |
|---|---|
| "Okay, so I'm going to do the introduction, the introduction has to start out with, has to start broad, so pretty much summarize the article and I'll explain how it relates to me," | $(T_a, W_{pl})W_{pl}$ $(T_a, W_{pl})$ $(T_a, W_{pl})$<br><br>*Note: The (,) means two codes occurring simultaneously.* |

**Figure 1:** Sample Coded Transcript

## Strengths and Weaknesses

There were strengths and weaknesses with the methods of this study. The natural composing environment strengthens the composer's ability to immerse into his natural process. Each writer has a different environment that helps her brainstorm and construct ideas. This allows for flexibility in each writer, which helps build the credibility of the results. The negative effects of a laboratory environment restrict the writer to an uncommon environment compared to his natural writing environment. This uncommon environment can create unwanted distractions that can

negatively affect the writing process, skewing the results. Unwanted distractions include uncommon noises and events that a writer would not be affected by if in a more common writing environment. On the other hand, the thinking-aloud protocol brings out the ability to know what the writer is thinking, which can be very beneficial; however, it had a negative impact on my study. This protocol became a distraction and influenced my natural process. This occurred because I think in Portuguese, and I had to simultaneously translate what I was thinking to speak in English, since the project needed to be in English. This distraction happened because I caught myself censoring and focusing on my words, which distracted me and increased the normal time to process the information in my head. I will address this in greater detail later on in my study. Even with the weaknesses presented, the thinking-aloud protocol contributed to finding patterns within my research that would not have appeared if I didn't use this method, such as discovering the constant need to reread the text. Thus, the strengths outweigh the weaknesses in this study, which makes the results reliable.

# Results

Table 2 presents the total of each code as a percentage of all codes. For example, code $T_r$ represented 9.21% of all codes. This table does not include more than one code together (for example, code $T_f$, $T_a$, and $T_{tol}$ within the four to nine words). The purpose of presenting Table 2 was to provide organized and clear data of the behaviors analyzed. Each column is divided by each category analyzed in this study, followed by the related codes beneath them. The totals were given in order to facilitate the comparison between sections whereas the percentage of the total is compared to the sum of the behaviors in that section. I have provided the frequency of each behavior along with the percentage to describe how each behavior relates to the total amount of behaviors that occurred (of which there were a total of 805).

| | Talking | | Reading | | Writing | | Distractions |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| $T_r$ | 74 - (9.21%) | $R_w$ | 6 - (0.74%) | $W_a$ | 10 - (1.24%) | $D_i$ | 21 - (2.61%) |
| $T_a$ | 122 - (15.19%) | $R_b$ | 44 - (5.47%) | $W_b$ | 2 - (0.24%) | $T_x$ | 2 - (0.24%) |
| $T_{lt}$ | 5 - (0.62%) | $R_s$ | 3 - (0.37%) | $W_c$ | 6 - (0.74%) | $C_a$ | 2 - (0.24%) |
| $T_q$ | 43 - (5.35%) | | | $W_d$ | 9 - (1.12%) | $M$ | 10 - (1.24%) |
| $T_{re}$ | 177 - (22.04%) | | | $W_s$ | 5 - (0.62%) | | |
| $T_t$ | 4 - (0.49%) | | | $W_{lt}$ | 1 - (0.12%) | | |
| $T_w$ | 149 - (18.55%) | | | $W_p$ | 27 - (3.36%) | | |
| $T_f$ | 13 - (1.61%) | | | $W_r$ | 2 - (0.24%) | | |
| $T_{an}$ | 8 - (0.99%) | | | $W_{pl}$ | 36 - (4.48%) | | |
| $T_{tol}$ | 23 - (2.86%) | | | | | | |
| *Total* | = 618 (76.91%) | **Total** | **=** 53 (6.58%) | **Total** | **=** 99 (12.16%) | **Total** | **=** 35 (4.33%) |

**Table 2:** Frequencies of Behaviors

# Discussion

As I began to organize my data, I was surprised by my patterns of behaviors. There were actions that I tended to do more often that I have never caught myself doing, such as talking about an action ($T_a$). It's also interesting to notice that only certain categories where influenced by my bilingual background. Each category brings out important patterns found by this study, with the talking category as the one with the most interesting patterns.

**Talking**

Talking significantly affected my writing by influencing the speed and revision, such as rereading my text. Related to writing speed, when I talk while writing ($T_w$), I do so slowly. That happens because I think in Portuguese. When I brainstorm or analyze text, I do so in Portuguese; however, when I write those ideas on paper, I translate in my head from Portuguese into English. Thinking in Portuguese speeds up my rhetorical analysis of texts and brainstorming because I am more familiar with my native language. Since this project required my transcript to be in English, my writing and process speed was reduced; I had to translate from Portuguese into English in my head and speak English during the thinking-aloud protocol. The benefit of writing and talking fast while planning ($T_{tol}$) in Portuguese is that it helps me rationalize the text and brainstorm what to write. Unfortunately, the slow pace during talking while writing ($T_w$) is sometimes the cause for distractions (D) to happen or "losing my train of thought" ($T_{lt}$) because I had to quickly analyze in Portuguese, translate, and write it in English.

I also consciously tend to reread aloud ($T_{re}$) what I wrote and that happened 22.04% (177 times) of the time; this was the code that happened most often during my composing process. I reread my writing from the minimum of three to the maximum of 23 times per page. All of the pages in my script contain rereading, with the exception of the last page (the conclusion). Rereading helps me to understand what I wrote and smoothly transition into another concept. Another benefit of rereading is to check whether I'm being faithful to the topic. My foreign language wasn't a factor when I reread the text because I absorb and store the information in my head in English; it is solely the rationalizing part that happens in Portuguese.

**When I brainstorm or analyze text, I do so in Portuguese; however, when I write those ideas on paper, I translate in my head from Portuguese into English.**

The tendency of rereading text is a common factor that I share with unskilled writers. Perl found the same issue in her study, stating , "Often in the midst of writing, students stopped and referred to the topics in order to check if they had remained faithful to the original intent" (207). Therefore, rereading is common not only in my writing, but also with unskilled writers. There are both positive and negative aspects of constantly checking back to the topic to remain faithful. It can be positive by demonstrating that the writer wants to be confident that his piece reflects the topic in the best manner necessary; however, it can be a distraction and negatively affect thee writing process, resulting in writer's block (Wb) or even losing the train of thought (Tlt).

Talking about an action ($T_a$) was a frequently occurring code, which emerged 122 times (15.19%). One benefit from talking about an action is that it helped me to be organized. For example, when I stated "okay, so I'm going to do the introduction," I was organizing what I would do, which also can be called planning about an action. That would be the same as $T_a$. Another benefit of talking about an action is that it helped me organize my thoughts in Portuguese, before I would write my ideas on paper in English. When I read, I pay attention to main ideas and key words. Talking about an action allowed me to organize these items in Portuguese and prepare them for translation. The method of planning aloud is similar to a method used by Donald M. Murray, which consists of "the stating of 'process goals'—mentioning procedures, that is, that he developed in order to write" (Berkenkotter 222). Berkenkotter found that "frequently, these procedures led the writer to generate a series of plans for carrying out the larger plan" (222). This planning happens as we write, not prior to writing the essay. In a positive aspect, using this approach helps Murray and I to organize the action needed to fulfill the goal: finishing the essay. However, it could have a negative impact on the natural writing process of other writers. For writers who are not used to this concept, it could lead them into distractions (D), such as writer's block (Wb) or even losing the train of thought (Tlt).

**Writing**

While talking is essential for brainstorming and the organization of my paper, writing is also very important for constructing the meaning of my essay. Within my writing category, I have codes based on two groups: editing processes and composing processes. Spelling ($W_s$) and punctuation ($W_p$) are categorized under the editing process group, whereas planning ($W_{pl}$) and writer's block ($W_b$) are categorized under the composing group. The writing category was only 12% of the total categories. This surprises me, since I previously thought that I checked punctuation, spelling, and citations frequently. Tony, on the other hand, "spent a great deal of his composing time editing" (Perl 202). I discovered that, according to the statistics, I am more concerned with my ideas connecting to the audience than the grammatical issues of my essay because of the language barrier. If I connect with my audience, then my conversation would have a greater impact than obeying every grammatical rule in the book. With this thought, it led me to check for punctuation less than I expected.

It is also interesting to notice that the majority of codes in the writing category that happened were planning (occurring 36 times, 4.48% of the total transcript) and punctuation (occurring 27 times, 3.36% of the total transcript). I found out that planning happened when I finished writing an idea to go to the other idea. To clarify, the planning done in my process is while I'm writing, not before I begin the essay. This type of planning differs from planning about an action, and consists of planning about the content. For example, when I state in my script, "Okay, so I'm going to do the introduction, the introduction has to start out with, has to start broad, so pretty much summarize the article and I'll explain how it relates to me, then I hit the important points, so how to , how am I going to transition to that important point? I have how my article is the problem, so I'll pretty much going to state." This quote shows planning as I'm writing, a unique pattern identified by this study. This was a natural way for me to move from the translation step into the writing step. Also, it naturally came out as a way to shift ideas within the text, contributing to the organization of my process. Common words that I have found that I use before I begin to plan are "umm," "okay," "so," and "alright." That can happen within a paragraph or before that paragraph begins, a pattern identified through the coding process. It is also interesting to notice that each word serves as a break from a previous idea, allows me to organize what I would write next, and gives me the opportunity to translate ideas into English.

Planning also happened in talking about an action ($T_a$), such as deciding to do the introduction first, as discussed earlier. This is common with unskilled writers, as pointed out by Perl. She said that unskilled writers "began writing without any secure sense of where they were heading, acknowledging only that they would 'figure it out' as they went along" (205). Since unskilled writers "figure it out" as they go along, this could be an explanation for writer's block. Writer's block is when a writer doesn't know how to proceed with their writing and gets stuck.

I only encountered writer's block twice: once halfway through the essay and once at the end, during the conclusion. One reason could be the lengthy writing process, since I normally don't take any breaks. Naturally, I discovered that, to get over the writer's block, I stop, take a deep breath, question myself, and then tell myself what to do. If I'm reading, I also reread to get my ideas flowing again to restart my composing process. This consequently slows down my process. One would think that writer's block could happen if my translation step "overheats," but the writer's block that happened was in regards with the content and not the process of writing.

**Reading**

Reading provides me with the text support as a base for my arguments, giving this category its importance. According to the data, the majority of my reading category is directed towards reading the text for information ($R_b$). This tends to mostly happen in the beginning of my

composing process, a pattern that I have found during the coding of the transcript (occurring 44 times, 5.47% of the total transcript). That normally gives me the ability to find a topic and select quotes. There was one exception, and that happened on page 10 of the transcript. During that time, I read the book to verify if a fact was actually included in the text. When that happened, I said, "I guess Mr. Murray was- I guess Mr. Murray was skilled, right? Let me see, let me go back to the page, Mr. Murray, Mr. Murray, Okay. I wanted to learn more about the planning and revising strategies of highly skilled and verbal writers." It can be inferred from this quote that reading the book only gives me the ability to brainstorm ideas. One benefit of gathering information at the beginning of the composing process is that, instead of going back to the text every time, it lets my ideas flow and not be disrupted. Ironically enough, this category was not disrupted by the translation of information in my head. Reading text for information in the beginning of my composing process was merely the act of absorbing information. Since I store information in my head in English, this process was not affected by the language barrier. Like any other writer, however, the flow of the writing process was affected by distractions.

### Distractions

Neither Perl nor Berkenkotter analyzed distractions in their study, but I decided to do so. The importance of distractions can best be seen by their disruption of a writer's composing process. In that respect, my distractions occurred when my ideas ceased from flowing, occurring 21 times (2.61%). During that time, I remembered about sending my essay to a friend to help me edit it before I would turn it in, which led me to call ($C_x$ happened two times, being 0.24%) and text him ($T_x$ happened two times, being 0.24%). He would then check for grammatical errors. After that distraction, I would reread what I last typed, take a deep breath, and then continue to write.

Distractions also occurred when I began to get tired of writing. I quickly became frustrated and that is where speaking in a foreign language came in ($T_f$ happened 13 times, being 1.61%). I would complain in Portuguese about being tired and then tell myself to get focused. For example, from the end of page 13 to the beginning of page 14, I got tired and distracted (the translation are in brackets): "– mumbling- So, so carol last name spelled out Astronomy notes, chapter 7, meus Deus eu vou ter que fazer tudo isso ainda hoje que saco [My Gosh, I still need to do all of this today. Darn it] 7:39pm, so depois eu vou fazer statistics [After I'll do statistics] - I would write, I forgot how to say this, I think I'm forgetting something, astronomy study, review statistics for now. Alright, let me go back to the reading journal– mumbling-." Thus, frustration caused by writing fatigue leads me to speak in a foreign language.

**As a bilingual writer, I experience many difficulties as well as benefits. One difficulty that I encounter constantly relates to untranslatable concepts, the "tug of war" problem.**

As previously stated, the thinking aloud protocol had a negative impact on my study. It caused major distractions and influenced my natural process by censoring words and transferring my focus away from the writing process. Consequently, it increased the time to process the information in my head, something that I didn't expect to happen. I did not think that the translation step actually increased the time it takes to write an essay. One method that I used to help me overcome the negative impact of the thinking-aloud protocol was mumbling, which made up 2.61% (occurring 21 times) of the total behaviors and tendencies. This helped me process my information when I was distracted by the protocol. The mumbling that I did was a way to think quickly in Portuguese and bypass the thinking-aloud protocol. As seen by the previous quote, mumbling happened at the end or at the beginning of the distraction, being a medium for me to go back into writing.

## Implications

Through the results acquired by this study, my writing process can be related to Tony's and Murray's composing processes. Certain tendencies that I had, such as reading text for information in the beginning, were tendencies that Tony has. A strength that I shared with Murray in my process was the planning of process goals. By creating these small goals to accomplish within my essay, I was able to keep consistency in the voice and in the structure of my composing process. On the other hand, a weakness that I need to improve on would be planning content beforehand, a similar process that I shared with the unskilled writers examined by Perl. Furthermore, my slow writing process that happens due to my language barrier is a factor that native English speakers do not go through because of the translation that happens in my head. It can be inferred that each writer has strengths and weaknesses in certain areas, such as spelling or transitions. By analyzing the results, I have learned that my style of composing an essay consists of a large amount of rereading and a small quantity of editing.

As a bilingual writer, I experience many difficulties as well as benefits. One difficulty that I encounter constantly relates to untranslatable concepts, the "tug of war" problem. Untranslatable concepts normally appear in the form of "slang" and that happened when I stated "meus Deus eu vou ter que fazer tudo isso ainda hoje que saco [My Gosh, I still need to do all of this today. Darn it.]." In this case, the closest word to the definition of "que saco" would be "darn it," but it is not the literal translation. Because of that problem, it takes me longer to find a substitute for that idea. This is a struggle that I encounter when I write; it differentiates me from a native English writer. The benefit of being a bilingual writer is that I would try to incorporate examples and ideas that different cultures can also grasp. I tend to keep a globalized audience in mind when I write because I am aware of the personal difficulties that I had to overcome when I was learning the English language and reading texts. The goal of this study is to help bilingual writers to reflect upon their weaknesses and hopefully be able to apply my findings to their own process in order to improve their writing.

The unexpected data acquired by this study helped me transform my writing process into a healthier one. To reduce distractions, which are a result of fatigue, I will take 20-minute breaks. Also, to improve the organization of my writing, I will formulate an outline before I begin to write, but I will keep the writing process goals to allow room for flexibility when new ideas develop and creativity flows. In regards to improving my writing process due to the language issue, there is no way to change the tendency to think in another language and write in English. The only way that it could change was if English was my first language. I am certain that there are many writers that might be experiencing the same language difficulty, but the only solution to increase the translation speed when transitioning from their native language into English is to continue to practice to write and translate. To improve the planning content process, I should plan before writing as well, which will help by guiding me in the right direction. However, I should keep the "process goals," which Murray and I share because it is an effective method to organize what I will be doing throughout the essay. Planning affected my process by changing the direction I would take to fulfill the goal of writing an essay.

## Conclusion

As a freshman in college, an unskilled writer, and a non-native English writer, I believe that many could relate my study to their own writing process. One concept that many can relate to is distractions, and I hope that my results can provide solutions to those who read this study. Certainly, each writer has her own natural tendencies and behaviors, which normally relates to

writing environment. But if writers would make an introspective "checklist" of their own process, many would find healthier ways to improve and even build on their composing process.

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