

# A JOURNEY TO THE EDGE

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL WRITING IN THE ESL CLASSROOM

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## ABSTRACT

I teach ESL at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco. One class project was the creating and publishing of a collection of the students' autobiographical writings. This paper documents the process that my students and I engaged in. We used the process approach to writing and peer response. This paper discusses the theory behind this approach and its practical application in the classroom, the questions, concerns and dilemmas that I encountered and my responses to them. I also include the changes I would implement in a future project of this kind. The final product, *The Golden Gate of Hope*, is included in the appendix.

English as a Second Language  
Student Developed Materials  
Writing Composition  
Writing Instruction

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

This paper is about my personal journey through the uncharted waters of creating a book of students' writings in an ESL class. Chapter 2 gives the personal history and background that led up to the book the students named *The Golden Gate of Hope*. Chapter 3 is a description of the student population and the workplace where this project unfolded. The following chapter, Chapter 4, explains the approach I chose to use, the process approach, which included peer response, and how that worked in the classroom. Ann Raimes has a list of seven questions that teachers can use as a framework for lesson planning. Chapter 5 explains how these questions provided me support during the project. There are important issues to consider concerning how much time the students will have, how to choose topics, and what the classroom dynamics will be like. Two of the questions are presented in depth in the next two chapters. Chapter 6 addresses the question "*How will you integrate the four skills?*" This chapter also includes some example lesson plans that include the four skills and others that have a reading focus. The following chapter, Chapter 7, discusses the sensitive issue of error correction and teacher response to the students' writing. The students also tried their hand at some creative writing. Chapter 8 describes how poetry was added to the book. After the students completed their final drafts of all their writings we had to make decisions about

putting it all together in book form. They wrote an introduction, chose a title for the book and a design for the cover. This chapter, Chapter 9, is also about the completion of the final product and the presentation of the book, *The Golden Gate of Hope*, three years later. The final chapter, Chapter 10, discusses the changes I would make in a future writing project. A copy of *The Golden Gate of Hope* follows.

## CHAPTER 2

### BACKGROUND

*“The only way to love a person is...by listening to them, seeing and believing in the god, in the poet in them.” (Brenda Ueland 1987, 6).*

A few years ago I would not have believed that I would be teaching writing in my ESL classes or writing a thesis paper on writing. In the previous eight years that I had been teaching, the writing done in my classrooms was primarily a reinforcement of oral language. The other skills took preference. This kind of writing is referred to as transcription, writing that focuses on grammar and structure and that strives for accuracy (Dvorak 1986). I thought the lower levels I was working with would not be capable of writing as a true communication skill. It was not until attending the Masters of Arts in Language Teaching Program at SIT that I became aware of the reasons that I had been avoiding writing and also of the value of writing itself. These realizations occurred in two separate classes, Teaching Culture and Teaching and Learning the Written Language.

In the Teaching and Learning the Written Language class I realized that it was not only my belief that lower level students would not benefit from writing as much as the other skills that was preventing me from including writing in my classes. I had my own ambiguous feelings about writing. I was able to tap into my earliest negative experience with writing in a simple exercise in class. Without actually understanding what I was doing, I found myself folding my sheet of loose-leaf paper vertically into six sections.

Then the memory appeared as clear as if I were there in my second grade class. As punishment I had to write “I must not laugh in class” one hundred times. This was not an easy feat for someone who was still mastering the motor skills of holding a pencil and making uniform letters. Whenever I was given this particular punishment I would count the number of words in the sentence I had been given and fold the paper into the same number of columns. Then I wrote down the page, completing a column of the word *I*, a column of the word *must*, writing each word a hundred times, and going on to the next, instead of writing a complete sentence a hundred times. This tactic made it easier for me to get through this tedious exercise. I might have also been resisting the repetition of the message. I do not remember. But I do remember that it was a painful experience. So writing as a punitive activity was my first memory of writing. Added to this were memories of my writing being attacked by the teacher’s red pen on search and destroy missions, leaving no error untouched. These strong images informed me that I had felt not only unsupported by my teacher’s responses, but I had felt attacked. Was anyone listening to what I was saying? Writing was like an offering that was being rejected.

I began to see how there was often heaviness around writing for me. It was not easy for me to let go and express my true self. This self-confident girl did not trust herself on paper. I am sure back in the 50s and 60s our English teachers were doing their best. In our literature classes, it is clear as I reflect back, they believed that the meaning was only present in the text and we were expected to produce the correct responses in our writing. There was not much reinforcement for those of us who were expressing other ideas. I came to distrust my intuition.

In this same class at SIT we wrote our autobiographies as writers. I recalled a few positive experiences that had been forgotten or buried under an unconscious self-limiting belief that I could not write. One was a journal I had kept over 25 years ago when I was traveling for the first time in the Third World. I had a daily practice of dialoging with myself on paper. This journal served as a tool for making sense of a new culture and also for developing a deeper understanding of my own culture and myself as a cultural being. I also recalled a composition of mine being read aloud by my English Composition teacher when I was a freshman in college. She had chosen my composition as a good example of descriptive writing.

The writing we did in this class at SIT enabled me to rediscover and express my voice on paper. The teacher's encouragement and attitude had a very positive effect on me. He communicated that interest that Brenda Ueland speaks about, that "tell me more" attentiveness (Ueland 1987, 8). Here the focus was on the process of writing and not the end product. This was quite a contrast to my earlier experiences. This class was key for me in understanding my fears and supported me in the process of letting go of the fear and old beliefs and gaining trust in myself as a writer. In turn, I could trust my students' writing and myself as a writing teacher.

One of our assignments in our Teaching Culture class was to write an autobiography telling who we were on a personal, family, cultural and community level. This experience affected me in quite a profound way. Looking back to the beginning of my life, I could clearly see the different choices I had made and the important events of my life all leading to and connecting with the next in such a natural way. They were all the threads woven together to form the tapestry of my existence. No mistakes, no regrets.

There was a deep sense of clarity and understanding. I could see how I had arrived at the exact spot where I stood on that summer day in Vermont. The pieces of the puzzle fell into place and it all made sense.

Is it not common to want to pass on to others what has had a positive impact on us? I think this was my original motivation. I hoped to go back into the classroom after the summer and create the possibility for my students to experience meaning and empowerment through writing. The students in my class called “Georgetown” could write their stories. I had a vision of a book. I had seen some compilations of writings by ESL students from one of the community colleges in the area. They wrote about their countries of origin and about themselves, and their families and their new lives in America. How exciting a prospect: my students would begin to find their voices in their new language via the written word. Writing would also be an important tool for learning their second language. We could put together a book of their writings, design a nice cover and have a final product that would be theirs, something they could be proud of. I would be given the chance to know them on a more personal level through their autobiographical writings. I did not do this immediately. It stayed in the back of my mind like a seedling waiting for the right conditions to sprout. When a volunteer, Kim Sarlo, entered the picture, I felt I had the support I needed to take on this project.

I have been working at the Jewish Community Center of San Francisco (the JCC) for 10 years. The JCC is one of the agencies that aids in the resettlement of refugees from the former Soviet Union (FSU). The ESL school is part of the Émigré Department. The Director of the Émigré Department, Barbara Litt, was very excited about the idea of

creating this book. She thought it could serve the JCC as a historical document, portraying the lives of the émigrés who have found a place for themselves at the JCC.

There was some resistance on the part of the students. They didn't think they could put together a book of their stories. "We're only level three!" I heard them echo one of my earlier beliefs about what beginning level students were capable of. And since this was to be my first time teaching writing I was not without my own fears and doubts. Words of inspiration came in the form of a paraphrased quotation sent to me from my advisor at SIT in an e-mail.

*The poet said to the people, "Come to the edge." And the people said, "No, we're frightened." The poet said, "Yes, come. Come to the edge." And the people came, and she pushed them..... and they flew.*

My advisor had given me a gift -- a push, so I passed it on.

## CHAPTER 3

### STUDENT PROFILE

All the students at the JCC are from the former Soviet Union. The majority of them are from Russia and Ukraine but they are also from Belarus, Uzbekistan, Kazakstan, and Azerbaijan. Most of them are very recent émigrés, having been in this country from only a few months to a year. Their ages range from early twenties to close to ninety years old. They usually emigrate with their families or come to be reunited with family members who live in San Francisco.

The vast majority of these émigrés are Russian Jews. They came to the U.S with refugee status because of the increasing anti-Semitism and nationalism in their native countries.

The Jewish Community Center welcomes them into the larger Jewish community and exposes them to Jewish cultural and religious programs, English classes, and offers support in general in their adjustment to their new lives.

Most of the émigrés from the FSU are professionals and have attended higher education back home. They are engineers, doctors, teachers, musicians, accountants, economists, and computer programmers. They are intelligent people and knowledgeable about world affairs. Culture, the arts and music are important values in their lives. Many of them have studied English but this was often many years ago. The Soviet language

approach emphasized grammar and translation and was teacher-centered. The more student-centered, communicative approach used in many classrooms here is alien to them. But they are eager to learn. They want very much to get a job and get on with their lives. When it becomes apparent that this will take a considerable amount of time, they can become discouraged. This realization added to culture shock, and the realities of the high cost of living in the Bay Area, sometimes results in depression.

On the other hand, the people from the FSU are resilient. They have experienced the devastation and multiple losses of World War II, the Holocaust, the Stalin years, the chaos of the fall of the Soviet Union, Chernobyl, food shortages, and increasing anti-Semitism. Their lives have never been easy. Maybe that is why their hearts are so big. They are proud people and confident in themselves. They are also very kind and generous. Family is of utmost importance and their children and grandchildren are very dear to them. Their relocation to the United States is often in hopes for a better future for their children.

When we began this project most of the students in my class were level 3 or a high beginning level. A good part of this class was in their 40s and 50s. It was almost mid-semester and I underestimated the time it would take to complete the book. Time was also spent on life skills, which had a sense of immediacy in their daily lives. The project was extended into the summer session. Some of the students who had not completed final drafts did not continue into the summer. Unfortunately, their stories were not published in the book. Some new students joined us. A few of them were more advanced in their language learning process.

## CHAPTER 4

### PROCESS APPROACH AND PEER RESPONSE

I chose to utilize the process approach for this book writing project. This chapter will provide an overview of the theory and practice of this approach and will also discuss peer response, which was an integral part of this process.

Recently the process approach to writing has become more prevalent. In this approach the emphasis is on the process of writing itself as opposed to the final written product. The underlying assumption is that writing itself is a valuable learning tool. Through the writing of drafts the writer discovers new ideas and the language needed to express those ideas. The teacher is able to respond at different points in the process to support the student instead of the traditional approach when the teacher responds only to a finished product and so therefore acts more like a critic or judge. There's a shift to viewing the students' struggle with writing as part of an important process instead of an inability to write (Zamel 1985, Raimes 1991).

Pre-writing activities allow time for generating and developing ideas. Some pre-writing activities are brainstorming, list making, reading, speaking, listening to audiocassettes and watching movies.

The first draft is only the beginning. The students are encouraged to write without worrying about making mistakes. The teacher's responses to drafts should be

gentle and supportive and focus on the positive. This attitude respects writing as personal, as a part of us. The responses are suggestions. The writer is in charge. The teacher's initial response is not correction. Raimes believes that the first reading should be done without a pen in hand so the teacher is a true reader (Raimes 1983).

The quality of the feedback is positive, encouraging and focuses in on the strengths. The focus is on *what* is said not *how* (Elbow 1986). Some others believe that the teacher can ask questions at this time that might lead the student to develop their ideas. (i.e. How do you feel about this now? How can I help you revise?) Others think it is appropriate at this point to address language problems that interfere with communication only. Most everyone agrees that there are no corrections on grammar or structure on the first draft. Here the focus is on content.

After receiving the teacher's feedback the next step is the revision or second draft. The student may also be receiving feedback and support from other students. (I will elaborate more on peer response later.) The teacher's response to the second draft is usually more language oriented. There are many different approaches to student errors. Raimes believes that rewriting improves accuracy and content with or without teacher feedback. Some research holds that indicating the location of errors improves accuracy as much as correction itself. Students can be given the responsibility for error correction and work together to improve their drafts. The teacher can use editing symbols to point out where they are having difficulties. Care is taken to avoid *task overload*, when the student becomes overwhelmed by the need to write correctly and express ideas as well. The teacher can meet or conference with the students individually to work on language.

There could be more than one revision but eventually the student will complete the process with a final draft. Research has shown that teachers' constructive responses to content, and not correction of form, has a strong impact on students' writing (Dvorak 1986, Hendrickson 1980).

Peer response is often an important component to the process approach. This functions the best when there is a sense of community in the class. It would be productive to invest some time in developing trust and positive relationships. Students respond to and support each other's writing in a variety of ways. The students respond to their reading of the first draft in a positive way. Like the teacher, they focus on ideas. They are encouraged to say what they liked about it. There is evidence to support the fact that writing improves when you are aware of what you do well. The students ask for more information when they have interest. If there is something they did not understand they ask for clarification. This exercise can take place in pairs or in small groups. Students can read their writing out loud to each other or give their writing to a peer for this student to read silently.

The revised draft might then be passed on to the teacher for feedback. Peer response includes proofreading of a revised draft. This proofreading requires some degree of support and structure from the teacher. The teacher may have included editing symbols that the students can work on. Another technique is for the teacher to instruct the students to look for subject and verb presence, agreement, or focus on any other language problem that is common to this class. They need guidance to be able to read with a discriminating eye. Students also help each other add or leave out details. They can discuss what they have changed and whether or not they believe it has enhanced their

writing. Students can choose what it is they would like help with and therefore limit the other's response to what they want to focus on. Peer response works best when they are given guidelines. Peer response has a dual purpose: It makes it possible for more writing to take place, since one teacher is limited in the amount of writing he or she can read and respond to, and students working together learn from each other.

There was visible evidence that the students were learning through process writing. Every step along the way afforded them opportunities for language learning. At first it was new for them, like it was for me, to let go of accuracy and concentrate on generating ideas and expressing themselves. Their background in language studies in their countries is grammar based with a concentration on correction of errors of any kind. Students ask for correction. They might doubt a teacher's legitimacy if they are not being corrected consistently. Students may be confused about why the teacher does not stop them when they are speaking to indicate or correct their errors. Yet once they understood the objective they let go of the old expectations and wrote freely. Later they had their time to go over errors with each other and seemed to enjoy working with the editing symbols. I was worried that they might feel overwhelmed by the amount of revisions I asked them to do. Of course there were times when a student wished a draft would be the final one. But in general they worked diligently without complaints. I believe they enjoyed working with each other in peer response. They supported each other, showing interest in each other's stories. I felt they had a commitment to help everyone achieve their best possible writing. Maybe this solidarity was a natural occurrence since they could identify with each other because of the common experiences. Or perhaps it was

because all the stories would appear in the same book together that they had investment in each one. They worked seriously on their own and on each other's drafts.

For me, one of the most challenging aspects was to break my habit of correcting on the spot. In conversation practice I had no problem stepping back and listening to the content and not interrupting the students with corrections. But in the past, writing had been the place where I reacted instantaneously to errors, if only pointing them out and allowing the students to find the correct form. I actually drew from their patience with the process. The process approach involved more time. I understood that intellectually but I found myself wanting it all to move along more quickly. For example, I decided that it would be helpful to teach them some editing symbols and then I could feel myself becoming impatient. I realized that the students needed more time to become familiar with the symbols before they could use them efficiently. These problems brought me more awareness of my habits and how attached I was to them. I was forming new habits and I had the opportunity to stand back, breathe and observe learning taking place.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE MASTER PLAN

I really appreciate Anne Raimés and her ability to present her theory in such a clear, precise and accessible way. Her seven questions were useful in providing me with a framework for lesson planning. Raimés bases her questions on the following beliefs:

1. Writing is a connected text, not just single sentences.
2. Writers write for a purpose and a reader.
3. The process of writing is a valuable learning tool for all of our students.

#### Ann Raimés' Seven Questions

1. How will you integrate the four skills?
2. How will you/the students choose the topics?
3. How will you make the subject -matter meaningful?
4. Who will the reader(s) be?
5. How will the students work together in class?
6. How much time will you give the students?
7. What will you do about response/errors? (Raimés 1983)

I have chosen to present my responses to the first question concerning the four skills and the last question on responding to errors in separate chapters because they are issues that required more thought and therefore a longer explanation.

*“How will you/the students choose the topics?”* is Raimes’ second question. One of the first questions I had to ask myself was: Who will choose the topics for the writings that will make up this collection?

The process was a natural flow, with one topic leading to the next. At first I had thought of giving them a list of topics in the beginning of the project and asking them to respond to them as far as their interests and have them add their own. But instead I just followed my intuition by starting out with a topic everyone seemed genuinely interested in and letting it move from there. It took on its own direction. This resulted in student-generated topics without my ever actually asking them directly for a list of topics.

My hope was for the learners to use writing as a tool to clarify their thoughts and ideas and to tell stories from their hearts. In this process they would be discovering meaningful language that connects them to their experience, language that they need to express themselves on a personal level. These stories would generate the language necessary for them to talk about issues that are central to their lives. This is resting on the belief that language learners will be more motivated to acquire new language when they feel a true need to communicate something meaningful.

The first writing assignment I gave them was to write about a childhood memory. I suggested they think of a special day that stood out, or to write about when they felt proud of something they had done, or a special celebration they remembered. They wrote

about gifts they had been given by their parents, pets they had had, and special relationships from their past. They chose to write about important moments in their lives and in the lives of others that were close to them. One of the students wrote about an experience she had at her uncle's farm. Their writings showed me that these were truly cherished moments that they were recalling from their past.

The conversations that followed these writings were focused on the settings where these memories had taken place, their native countries. It seemed that the students were saying that to know them, the reader must know about where they are from, that the reader must become familiar with the places where these memories were made. These writings naturally led into the topic of their native country.

The topic of their native country or city demonstrated the great pride they have in their homeland. They had made the decision to leave their country but they had left a place they had loved dearly in spite of the problems there. They brought in photographs and books with images of these places to share with the group. They brought these encircled in their arms like precious gifts or children that they loved. There were a thousand stories told and untold. Only some of them made it to paper. There were moments of sadness and expressions of great loss. We talked about homesickness and what different people did to cope with these feelings.

Movies and readings and the discussions that followed also led to new topics. For example, after watching the film *Moscow on the Hudson* (Mazursky 1984) they were interested in talking about why they had made the decision to come to America. People spoke and wrote about Chernobyl and how they had been affected by the nuclear disaster. They spoke of the chaos that had resulted from the dismantling of the Soviet system.

Others wrote or spoke about the affects of nationalism in the different republics. For example, one student had lived in Ukraine most of his life but his family had immigrated there when he was a young child. He was brought up speaking the universal language at that time, Russian. But when Ukraine became a sovereign country he was not able to find a job because he did not speak Ukrainian. All of a sudden he was a foreigner in his own land. There were many stories of anti-Semitism, ranging from acts and threats of violence to limitations on their education and job opportunities and of course the fear of practicing the Jewish religion. Economic troubles were being blamed on the Jews as it had been historically in the FSU. I could see and feel in their words the determination that their children not also be subjected to this discrimination and prejudice.

We read an immigrant's story, which partially focused on the author's personality. That in turn generated the need for language to express personality and preferences. This seemed like an appropriate moment to write about themselves as individuals. So the next topic was: Who am I? Some students wrote about their personalities and several people talked about their professions. Their job seemed to be a good follow up topic. I asked them to focus on what they liked about their jobs, in order to produce a more personal story. The writings and discussions about their jobs allowed me to see more clearly how their identities, like Americans also, can be very tied to their professions. Their new lives in America did not include this part of themselves. Here, because of their lack of English, they suffered the loss of that professional image. "Who am I now?" I had always thought that the people in the Soviet Union had been given one job and that they had stayed with that position for their entire lives, not having much

chance of change under the totalitarian regime. Sergey's writing disproved my belief. As you will see in *The Golden Gate of Hope*, he had several different professions.

If someone really did not want to write on a topic I asked him or her to bring in a photo of some importance to them. This was usually a family photograph or a photo of their children or of a relative. The person in the photo frequently became the inspiration for the next writing.

The one topic that many people had a hard time with was their hopes for the future. This was most likely due to the stage of culture shock they were all experiencing. Their hesitance surprised me but I respected it.

*"How will you make the subject matter meaningful?"* The subject matter was intrinsically meaningful for the students because it was autobiographical writing. What could be more meaningful to them than their own lives? Part of my job as a coach or reader was to help the students express their ideas. I tried to ask provocative questions in my responses to their writings. Sometimes these questions acted as stimulus for going a little deeper into the heart of the matter. This was dependent upon my understanding exactly what my students were saying. The interactions with the other students in peer response also contributed to this development.

The fourth question: *"Who will the reader be?"* has been addressed. Ultimately any person curious about the émigrés at the JCC will have access to the personal stories in this book. Since the process writing approach was used, the students were also readers during their interactions in peer response. And of course, I was also a reader within this process. But the final audience was anyone at the JCC, members or anyone who used its services. This group also includes the administration and Board of Directors.

*“How will the students work together in class?”* Will they write in class or at home? The students worked individually in class and at home. In the classroom they worked in pairs and small groups as well as together as a whole class. The whole group dynamic was used for mini lessons and frequently to generate ideas and vocabulary when a new theme was introduced. Small groups of three or four were also formed for brainstorming and sharing ideas in pre-writing activities and later for error correction. Students worked in pairs for generating ideas and for a good part of the peer response work. The group and pair work in pre-writing activities was crucial for the development of vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure. This is how they discovered the language they would later need in their writing. During peer response they continued this interaction. Working with others aided students in the challenging task of developing ideas in a new language. Having time for communicative practice before writing helped them express their ideas clearly. They worked individually on drafts in the classroom and at home. Providing class time for writing reinforces the value or importance of writing. Homework assignments were either writing drafts or more controlled exercises.

Question 6 is *“How much time should I give my students for their writing?”*

Raimes states that because it is time itself that makes writing so different from speaking it should not be compromised. Prewriting activities and revisions take time but they are crucial for the writing process. “Writers have time to make decisions, time to play around with ideas, time to construct and reconstruct sentences, to experiment with new words, and above all, time to change their minds.” (Raimes 1983, 21) Time posed a dilemma for me. When the book project extended into a second semester I began to feel pressure to complete the book. But with or without a book project the semester is limited

and decisions need to be made about time. How many prewriting activities will they engage in? How many revisions will they write? Most important is that the students have sufficient time so they benefit from the process and feel proud about the end product.

## CHAPTER 6

### INTEGRATING THE FOUR SKILLS

*“How will you integrate the 4 skills?”* is Anne Raimés’ first question in planning lessons in writing. This chapter will explain how I went about integrating reading, listening and speaking with writing. This chapter also includes some sample lessons.

Most lessons integrated the 4 skills. Whether it was a prewriting activity or peer response, an integral part of each lesson was oral communication. Students had an opportunity to discuss the ideas they had generated in brainstorming, or tell a story. Sometimes they read to each other as a prewriting activity. The lessons here revolved around the language needed to ask wh-questions, and clarifying questions. All of the students’ stories in the first semester were at least in part told to a partner or small group before writing.

If students are speaking to each other they are also listening. Listening practice came in many forms. The students practiced active listening by listening to a partner tell them a story or share some ideas and then by doing a “say back” or a paraphrase of what she or he had just heard. We used cloze exercises and dictation. Sometimes they listened to recordings of immigrants telling their own stories and afterwards the students answered questions about the story, made comments or retold it.

Besides the actual writing of drafts for the book the students engaged in other writing activities. They wrote to develop schema before reading. They wrote after

reading to interact or respond to the text. They made lists, brainstormed on paper, and did free writing to generate ideas.

Reading played an important role in the lessons. The readings were mostly stories written by immigrants to the United States or Canada. These immigrants, from many different countries, were also ESL students and dealing with culture shock as well as a new language. The students were very interested in what these people had to say. First of all, they identified with the common problems they faced as newcomers. I think they were also impressed that these students of English had their stories published in a textbook. The level of the language proficiency of these students was similar to theirs. I think this motivated the students. It reinforced the idea that even though their English was limited they were capable, like these other immigrants, of writing meaningful stories.

Research has shown that students cannot become effective writers if their language development is only oral/aural. Krashen believes that language learners are able to acquire all the knowledge needed about composition through extensive writing. Through reading they become familiarized with organizational structure and sentence structure. In my experience I have seen that frequent readers are good writers in their first language and even in their second or third language if they have attained fluency in these other languages. He believes that writing skills are acquired, not learned, and that the source of comprehensible input is reading with a focus on the message. Writing competency is acquired through reading, and writing fluency is acquired through extensive writing practice according to Krashen (1984).

Students also responded to texts in the more traditional way, after reading. But instead of the traditional comprehension questions they answered questions that would

help them make a personal connection with the text. They wrote about something they liked or what they had found most interesting. They described their feelings or what they were thinking about when they were reading. They drew parallels to their lives, wrote about anything else they found significant. They also could raise questions about what they found confusing or what was unclear to them. These writing exercises offered the students a way to interact with the text to find meaning.

I agree with Zamel that the meaning is inside the reader and not in the text, and by interacting with the text, or dialoging with it, the meaning is discovered. She has referred to this process as “writing one’s way into reading”. In this way the reader can become an active participant even before the reading begins. Writing was useful in schema building to prepare for the reading by highlighting their personal experience. The authors can be seen as other voices instead of the only voice of authority. Many of the students demonstrated to me that they were not intimidated by the authority of the text as far as ideas were concerned. As I mentioned before, their experiences were similar and they felt confident that they had important ideas to express about their own experiences in their new culture.

So like Krashen, the interdependence of the language processes of reading and writing is confirmed by Zamel, who in turn quotes Spack, “Just as reading provides comprehensible input for writing, writing can contribute comprehensible input for reading. Just as students need to become better readers in order to become better writers, they can become better readers by becoming better writers.” (Zamel 1992, 480)

The students of the group *Georgetown* “found their way into the texts” by summarizing, retelling, reacting and reflecting on the texts. In this way I think they took

advantage of the meaning making potentials of both reading and writing. The reader's response and the meaning they make are at the center. These attitudes or beliefs run quite contrary to the way I was taught reading and writing. Believing that the text held the truth, our reading lessons informed us that writing also involved the correct ideas. Reflecting on my earlier experiences as a student, I recall having tried to figure out how to write what would be acceptable to whoever had a monopoly on that truth. I honestly would have to say that I experience residues of this today. They now serve as reminders to me that my students may also fear taking risks or may distrust their own writing.

Mini-lessons addressed common problems and areas in their writing that needed support. There were also several lessons on editing symbols. Mini-lessons frequently took place after I had read their drafts and had identified common errors or weak areas but sometimes they happened spontaneously when the need for clarification or practice in some area became apparent. We had a planned mini-lesson about twice a week. Sometimes the focus of these lessons was on grammar i.e. subject-verb agreement and sometimes it was on form, i.e. connecting words and combining sentences.

On the following page are two different examples of lesson plans that I used. The first one is a balance of the four skills. The second has a focus on reading. Lessons with a concentration on reading included the other skills as well, but reading played a more central role.

## Lesson Plans

### Lesson #1

Day 1:

Introduction of a new topic

- students listen to an immigrant's experience on audio cassette
- students discuss the content of the cassette in a small group
- students brainstorm ideas which personalize or connect their personal experience with the speaker – a whole group activity
- students share their experience with a partner – conversation

Students write about their personal experience – a first draft

- students exchange their writing with a partner.
- students respond to each other asking clarifying questions or pointing out what they like
- students expand on their writing or make other changes and hand in the draft

Day 2:

Teacher returns the 1<sup>st</sup> draft with a response focusing on content

- mini lesson on subject /verb agreement (or an area where there were considerable amounts of errors in the first drafts)
- students read each other's drafts again with attention to verb/subject agreement
- students make corrections and hand in this draft

Day 3:

Teacher returns draft with editing symbols to point out errors

- students correct their own papers
- students check each others work
- students have conferences with the teacher
- students write a final draft

## Lesson #2

Day 1:

Introducing a new topic

- pre-reading exercises – schema building
- students brainstorm what they know or how they feel about the topic
- students read an immigrants story
- students help each other with new vocabulary
- teacher answers students questions /practices pronunciation of text
- students work in pairs to respond to the text - discuss what they think about the story/how it relates or doesn't relate to their experience

Day 2:

- students do a free writing exercise about their personal experience
- students tell a partner what they wrote about and partner responds to the content /asks clarifying questions / asks for more information
- students write first draft

- students read each others draft and respond to content
- students make changes and hand in to the teacher

Day 3:

Teacher returns first draft with a response to content and ideas

- mini-lesson on connecting words and combining sentences.
- students read each others drafts with attention to this point and look for other errors
- students revise and hand in new draft

Day 4

Teacher returns second draft with editing symbols

- students correct their own papers
- students check each others work
- students conference with teacher
- students write a final draft

## CHAPTER 7

### ERRORS

Anne Raimes' last question is "*What will you do about response and errors?*"

This question provided me with a lot of food for thought. Errors are a natural part of learning anything. I often tell my students that errors are their friends, opportunities for learning. Are they for me too? Would this hold true for me as far as my learning from my students? I thought I believed this. Later I would see how challenging it could be to strike a balance and know when to focus on process and product as I came to see errors as obstacles when time became an issue for me. How could I find a way to deal with errors without becoming too product oriented when we were going to "publish" a book that required close editing and needed to be completed by the end of the summer semester?

Raimes quotes Kroll and Schafer in calling errors "windows into the mind" (Raimes 1991). Through this window we have the possibility of seeing our students learning process in action. I tried to see the strategies they were using that led them to their errors. Sometimes they were due to interference of their first language. The verb *to be* is not used in the present tense in the Russian language. And Russian is much more flexible in sentence structure. For example, prepositional phrases are acceptable just about anywhere in a sentence: in the beginning of a sentence, between the main subject and the verb and at the end of the sentence. Once the identity of the subject of the

sentence is established it is not necessary to use a pronoun because the verb implies the subject. The same verb tense is used for present continuous and simple present. Sometimes they had misunderstood a rule or had not applied it correctly. On other occasions they lacked knowledge of a structure or rule. At times they had simply forgotten a rule or had been careless, and it was just a mistake. Peter Elbow says that writing is “the ideal medium for getting it wrong”. (Elbow 1985, 286) and Raimes says “it is also the ideal medium for eventually getting it right.” (Raimes 1987, 40) Unlike speaking, writing affords the time to correct and change what has been written. It also provided me the opportunity to see the errors repeated on paper so I could more easily identify the recurring.

Errors informed me about what the students were struggling with and what I needed to teach. As I mentioned in the preceding chapter there were mini-lessons on different grammar points: subject-verb agreement, contrasting *be* and other verbs, article use, and also in the areas of syntax-sentence structure, and mechanics like spelling and punctuation. We worked on word choice, vocabulary and idioms, always in the context of the topics they were writing on. They contrasted adjectives and adverbs. I did not do much teaching in the area of organization. There was a lesson or two on combining sentences and connecting words. They did not demonstrate a need for instruction in this area most likely a result of their strong academic background and the fact that the majority of the students from the former Soviet Union are avid readers.

The writing process itself was another area for learning. They learned different ways of generating ideas, writing drafts, and revising. I took common errors directly from their writing and used them as worksheets for groups. Their mistakes also

demonstrated over and over again how they had so much to say but lacked the sophisticated language to express themselves on a more profound level. I remember this well from my own experience in learning a second language. It is probably safe to say that most human beings feel this longing to express themselves as mature adults with their complex ideas and feelings. In the future I would probably encourage them to keep an error log or at least have a special place in the back of their notebooks to record errors, correct them, and identify the rule that had been broken and practice writing more sentences with the correct form. This would provide them with a tool for learning and self-evaluation, a place they could come back to check their progress and practice more if needed.

How to respond to errors? I felt that since we were “publishing” a book the students writing would have to be as close to error free as possible. This presented me with a dilemma. I could feel the tension between the product approach to writing and the process approach. We were using a process approach but the product held a good deal of importance. Also students wanted to express more complex thoughts and so write more complex sentences than when they speak. Sometimes I wondered if they were ready for the structures that I would be helping them use. My most important goal was to help them say what they wanted to say. But I wanted them to say it in grammatically correct sentences and at the same time be certain that it was their voice not mine.

Initially the students had the responsibility for error correction. They worked in pairs to locate and correct their own and each other’s mistakes. They checked their verbs for tense, checked subject-verb agreement, word order, spelling and punctuation. Later they learned editing symbols that I used on later drafts to indicate the location of the error

so they could further take ownership of editing. They had substantial practice familiarizing themselves with the editing symbols that we would be using. There is some research to the effect that indicating location of errors improves accuracy as much as correction itself. Raimes believes that rewriting improves accuracy and content with or without teacher feedback. It was my intention to also encourage risk taking. I reminded myself to point out strengths and help them take note of the times they succeeded or got closer to accuracy. They did not appear to be suffering from task overload, or overwhelmed by the need to write correctly and express their ideas as well. Kim, the volunteer, and I did the final error correction in one-on-one conferences with the students. This felt like the ideal way for the teacher to participate in the correction of errors. We can serve as a gentle guide, point out the area in question and observe how the individual student self-corrects. Here is where we can often see if the student has made an error due to a lack of knowledge or if she or he has made a careless mistake. The teacher is more apt to be informed of the reason for the error also. It is a special time that can create a positive connection to the student on a personal level. A one-on-one interaction is too rare in my classroom. This is one of the gifts that writing has given me. It gave me permission to make the time to do this. I do this more now in all my classes, if only for a short time to check in with individual students. I do believe both participants value this experience.

## CHAPTER 8

### WRITING POETRY

Whenever a person mentions Pushkin or poetry you can see a look of joy spread over an émigrés face. These people are not known for easy smiling. They have such a deep appreciation for poetry and the arts, I thought it would be fun for them to try something creative like writing poetry. But when I first presented the idea of writing poetry the students' response was riddled with self-doubt. How could they write poetry if they could barely speak English? In fact I was not so sure myself that they would be able to produce anything that they would feel good about. They come from a culture of great poets and hold great respect for poetry. They might be too critical of themselves or too self-conscious. Whether or not the poetry would be part of the book was dependent on whether or not they could produce something we liked. But they are such a passionate people. I could feel poetry waiting there right under their skin. In spite of the resistance, I followed my intuition and we took the risk.

We looked at a poem written by an immigrant from Japan that was featured in one of the textbooks we were using. It was not a traditional poem but more like a Haiku, only a little longer. As usual, writing by other immigrants with limited English helped them find confidence in themselves. The resistance started to melt away. They showed a willingness to experiment with this kind of free verse. They formed groups to do the

brainstorming activity suggested. This generated words they associated with different seasons like humid, rainy, windy, snow, flowers, love, leaves, golden, green, smell, dry...etc. They asked each other “What do you see?” “What do you do?” and “How do you feel?” about each season. Then each group wrote about the season that they liked best. We had a mini-lesson on how to write a Haiku. Then as a class we worked together to create a Haiku on the board. They chose spring and first they brainstormed some adjectives and verbs. They wrote, counted syllables, changed words, and after some writing and rewriting a haiku emerged.

Nice smelling weather

Bright flowers bloom everywhere

Shining in the sun

It was a great moment. I felt so proud of them. I congratulated them on writing a beautiful haiku, their first poem in English. They were surprised by my reaction. And then slowly I could see them begin to realize it themselves, that they had been successful. They had done something they had said was not in their realm of possibilities. The next few days they wrote about all of the seasons. Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” accompanied them in the background. These poets worked in small groups with butcher paper and colored pens. Some of the poems were illustrated. A sense of playfulness appeared. We hung each one of the poems up around the room for everyone to see. They received a lot of attention from other teachers. The director of the center hung one of the poems up in his office. The poems were a special addition to the book, a lighter side. Besides the fact

that readers enjoy the poems, the readers also come to know them as creative people.

This is an aspect of them that they rarely have the chance to display when they are new arrivals in this country speaking limited English or none at all.

## CHAPTER 9

### PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

The tasks that remained after all the final drafts were complete were writing an introduction, choosing a title, and designing the book cover. The students brainstormed in a whole group to generate ideas for the introduction. They put together one version on the board and revised it, changing some language and adding and editing ideas. I typed this up and they worked in two groups and then came together and tried to integrate their different versions. They found and corrected their mistakes and wrote a final draft on the board. This was typed up and became the final introduction. Each time it had evolved into a clearer and a more meaningful statement of the purpose and content of the book, and of who they are.

I brought in several copies of different books that teachers and students had produced in writing classes at the community colleges in the area. They became quite excited while they reviewed these, imagining their own book in its final form. At times their efforts must have seemed abstract. They knew that all their hard work would end up somewhere but they had not actually had any way of visualizing it in such a concrete way. Now the book was more alive. In retrospect I see that it would have been helpful and more motivating for the students to see these finished products when we began this project.

For homework they came up with some possible names for the book. The final title, *The Golden Gate of Hope*, was arrived at in class through a brainstorming activity.

Choosing the design was a more complicated process. They had some ideas but no one was an artist. My father, who is an artist, agreed to attempt to draw some of the images they had thought of. One of them worked. They chose the color of the cover and the fonts for the title.

One of the students offered to work with me on the computer. Sergey had taught computer skills in his native country. I welcomed the chance to have a student work on the actual production of the book. Unfortunately, Sergey was unable to apply his knowledge and skills using an English language keyboard and programs.

So the rest was up to me. The process was a long one. The biggest difficulty was my inexperience with the mechanics of combining texts and photographs. The challenges are too numerous to name. My focus was drawn away from the book often by life and at other times I removed myself to take a break and return with a fresh start. Finally I sought out professional help in completing the project. Almost three years passed before the book was actually complete and printed.

The book presentation party was a wonderful reunion. The Director of the Émigré Department, Barbara Litt, and I hosted the celebration. It was not easy to find a time that would work for everyone to attend. Because most of the former students had daytime jobs we decided on an evening event. Unfortunately a couple of people who worked in the evening were not able to come. Marina called me to say she was on her way to Russia for a month vacation. Another sign of a success. I had seen her about eight months earlier when she was picking up one of her sons from a program at the JCC.

She was expressing herself quite confidently in English. How wonderful that a trip back to her homeland had become a financial possibility!

It was such a joy to reconnect with this group of people who I had witnessed struggle so hard to learn their new language when they were so recently arrived and were in the throes of culture shock. At the JCC we seldom have the chance to see our students later on when they have made the many adjustments that immigrants make. Their English had improved and they had a confidence about them that showed they had succeeded in making America their home. Ilya said he was happy now and his only complaint was that, since he and his wife work different shifts, he does not get to see her enough.

We had some food and a toast. They were impressed with the book. Several of them had answered a questionnaire I had sent in the mail asking them about their experience three years ago. I knew thoughts in retrospect would not be as fresh but it was an opportunity I had to seize. Everyone commented that they had learned a lot of new vocabulary. They needed more sophisticated words to express themselves and their feelings so there was more incentive to look up words in the dictionary to find the exact word they wanted. They also mentioned that grammar was an area they felt improved with writing. Mikhail said that he had appreciated writing several drafts because it provided him with the opportunity to check tenses, punctuation, and word order very carefully. He also mentioned that writing had improved his speaking skills since the students spoke to each other about the topics as well as writing about them. Yelena said that expressing her thoughts in English, as opposed to writing impersonal writing exercises, was helpful. She realized that she could express feelings in her new language

in spite of its limitations. She remembers that it was touching to recall and then write about childhood memories. Mariya thinks that writing about her city gave her a deeper appreciation of it. I asked them if they thought it had been a very difficult task. They all agreed that there had been times when it was very challenging but that they had to try and do their best. This was their first experience at “really” writing in English. I felt moved again as I did three years ago at how dedicated they are, how resilient in the face of difficulties, how they persevere. I truly admire them and am grateful to them for serving as models for me during times of adversity. Their feedback confirmed the theory that students learn better when they are engaged in meaningful communication. They went that extra mile because they were writing about what was important to them. They also were motivated by the desire to communicate to their readers: Americans with whom they were not in direct contact because of the language barrier. Without a voice one can feel invisible to others. This was a chance for them to show some of the complexity of who they are to people who might not otherwise know them. They made heartfelt comments on how thankful they were not only for English class but also for the support and encouragement that the JCC offered them in their first few months in the United States.

*The Golden Gate of Hope* will be featured in a special reference section in the Sacramento Public Library. A copy will also be available at the Jewish Community Library in San Francisco.

CHAPTER 10  
LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

Some of the dilemmas that arose and their remedies were instantly identifiable and others only became evident in retrospect. Before the beginning of the writing project, life skills had been an important component of our class. The students had expressed a need to practice speaking on the telephone, making doctor appointments, reporting problems to the landlord, communicating in stores and the Post Office. We had been videotaping some of these conversations and watching them. This was quite time-consuming and I began to see it as taking time away from writing. The book project needed much more time than I had expected. In the future if I were doing another book it would probably be the sole focus of the class. Another course might have life skills be a separate unit or part of the class that would be completed before the writing unit began.

Time became an issue that affected many of the decisions I made. My inexperience in planning this type of project resulted in some sacrifices. I was unable to finish the book project before the end of the semester. This meant that we continued on into the summer semester. Not all the students took the summer class so their stories were never completed and unfortunately do not appear in the book. Other students left the class before the end of the semester to attend Vocational English As a Second Language classes that were mandated by the government. It caused me considerable

grief to see them work so hard only to have these stories untold. New students enrolled and they needed to be integrated into the process. A few of the students were more advanced in their language acquisition and I thought some of the original students might have felt intimidated. In the future I would address this situation by focussing in on more community building to better integrate the new students. By this time I was feeling pressure to move along and finish the book in this shorter summer semester.

This coincided with my first experience with a volunteer. I neglected to dedicate time to really plan out how best to integrate her into the class. We could have shared more of the responsibility. While I was making notes and reflecting on my experience, I was aware of not dedicating time or energy in developing a clear volunteer position with its corresponding responsibilities. Because I failed to attend to this, Kim, the volunteer, may have spent too much time in observing the class. She would have had a more satisfying experience, and the class and myself would have benefited more from her presence, if I had attended to this around the time that she arrived.

In my responses I think I would attempt to encourage the student to go a little deeper into their topics. I might ask more probing questions in our conferences or in my written comments on their drafts. The students could also ask each other more personal questions. There were times I felt hesitant about asking direct questions such as “Did you experience discrimination?” Not everyone chose to respond to the question “Why did you come to the U.S.?” I wanted to respect their reluctance to be more revealing. It’s a tough call. Values clarification exercises might be helpful in opening up more personal topics that students might want to develop more in writing. Small groups could raise questions like, “What do I believe in?”, “What’s important to you?” This could lead to

cultural differences they have become aware of in the United States. Talking about values could make it easier to be clearer about future goals.

The students rarely engaged in free writing. Some students might benefit greatly from free writing warm-up exercises that encourage them to write without stopping and that gives them permission to write in Russian when necessary to keep up the flow. If the focus of the class were purely writing, more prewriting exercises would be an integral component.

Beverly Ingram and Carol King encourage teachers to write along with their students as often as possible. This is something I might like to experiment with in the future. “The point to communicate is that even for the teacher, whose proficiency in English is far beyond that of the students, composing requires time, thought, and patience. Even the teacher chews the pencil, stares into space, wads up the paper, and starts again.” (Ingram and King 1988, ix-x)

The idea of keeping all the writing in individual folders came late to me in the semester. Each student had a folder with their drafts and my personal notes apart from the teacher responses. These notes reminded me of whatever it was that I wanted to address with that particular student during conferencing or in a more informal way. I tried to keep a photocopy of the drafts with my responses on them to compare drafts and see what had been changed. Another way of doing it would be to have all the folders in a box or area in the classroom where students have access to their work at any time. When they complete a draft they enter it into the folder and then the teacher returns it to the folder with comments. This would give the students access to their work at any time with

the exception of when I was reading and responding to it. This would reinforce the fact that they are the owners of their writing, not the teacher.

In the future I would make a checklist for the students to use in their peer response. "Given specific guidelines in terms of checklists and /or questions to answer, students can learn what to look for in a classmate's composition in order to offer useful, constructive feedback."(Dvorak 1986, 157). Depending on the level of the students the questions or areas to focus on would vary.

More reading might also enhance their writing since frequent readers make good writers. There's a belief that more reading might be more effective in improving writing than more writing. Although the students in this particular class did not seem to need a great deal of support in organization or composition, readings would offer the opportunity to focus on looking at different writers' organization. This focus would expose the students to other ways of organizing and heighten their awareness of their own choices as writer. It would also expose them to new vocabulary.

One of my most serious regrets was not having structured feedback. I never asked them to reflect on their process or to tell me about their experience until after the book was completed. I believe it would have been more helpful to ask them at intervals questions like "Did you learn anything new about yourself? ", "Were you surprised by anything you wrote?" "What did you learn about English from doing this piece of writing?" "Do you think this lesson improved your English?" I would have learned more about how writing served them as an exploration process and as well as a language learning process. They could also have had the experience of sharing these reflections with each other. In the future I would also type up more excerpts from their writing so

that they could read each other's work on a more regular basis. In our class the students only read their partners work during peer response. At other times they read sentences from each other's writing that contained errors for correction. I can see that a typed paragraph of revised writings of different students at different times would be inspiring. Not only would they see the progress they are making as a group but they also would be getting a clearer vision of the collection of writings that they were creating together.

On the technical side, I now know that I should have been using a software program designed for combining text and image like Quark, for example. This program would have saved me a lot of time and frustration.

In the years that have transpired I have not attempted another book project but my students are engaged in more meaningful writing assignments. The Jewish Community Center is going to be demolished so a newer, more modern center can be built in its place. There is a "memory wall" in the lobby now which displays old photographs of people and the activities that they participated in during the seventy-five years that this old building served the Jewish community and the community at large of San Francisco. Everyone has been invited to bring in old photos and stories and place them in a book that is on a table in front of the memory wall. The students wrote very touching stories about their first memories of the center. They used the process approach without peer response. I decided to work with them instead. Not everyone participated but the ones that chose to had a special opportunity to express themselves in their new language, learn more English, get more one-on-one time with the teacher and also have their stories read by anyone who looked through the book. I took Polaroid photographs of them that accompanied their writing in the book.

I am repeatedly reminded of the healing power of gratitude. The expression of gratitude opens our hearts, warms our soul and brings us joy in the midst of difficult times or transitions. The written word offers a wonderful means to experience this. When our spoken words come too slowly or are inadequate to express our deeper emotions, writing can overcome these limitations. The émigrés who wrote these memories and participated in the book project appreciated the opportunity for significant and meaningful communication.

I feel grateful for having had the opportunity of sharing this experience with them.

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## APPENDIX