

# Cardinal Compositions

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## Reflective Writing Process of L2 Students

Bulmaro Miguel Gonzalez Ortega

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### For the Classroom

“Reflective Writing Process of L2 Students” examines how college students who are from outside the United States define and use reflection in their writing process. The essay considers reflection to be an important determinant of L2 students’ successful development of writing skills. The author interviews two students who learned English as a second language in their respective home countries. Questions that enable conversation on how these L2 students define and use reflection in their writing processes were asked during the interview.

The author reports that their study further enhances what previous studies have identified as the challenges faced by L2 students in their writing process. Similarly, the author finds out that most L2 students only identify what is to be revised in their drafts after correction, but not why they are to make such changes or revisions in their writing. This, the author notes, is caused as a result of cultural differences, and mostly the disparity in the educational training they got in writing in their home countries compared to in the U.S.

The argumentative structure in this essay is more conversational than confrontational as the author tries to establish areas of common ground. As a class, examine the strategies used in this essay to establish common ground and convey diverging opinions. Ask students to think back on their previous essays, and consider the following questions:

1. Have you used similar/different strategies for writing arguments and counterarguments? How so?
2. How might you improve those strategies, or what new strategies might you adopt to address counterarguments in your subsequent essays?

## Reflective Writing Process of L2 Students

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### Introduction

Over the years, there has been an abundance of scholarship on L2 writers' needs in classrooms (e.g. Fox, 1994; Matsuda, 2016). However, there are very few studies and research on L2 students and specifically, their understanding and use of reflection in writing (e.g. Kelly, 2016). This paucity of research must be acknowledged in order to meet the learning needs of L2 students, particularly the need for reflective practices in their writing process. Lauren J. Kelly's article aims to "better understand how and to what extent these L2 students are reflecting to help guide the program and offer suggestions that could be more widely applied to peer review groups and composition classrooms in general" (Kelly, 2016, p. 229). In order to provide evidence for her study, she conducted a survey that compares reflective process of fifteen (15) L1 students and fifteen (15) L2 students participating in a small-group tutorial program. Additionally, there have been other researchers such as Kara Taczak who have extended the importance of reflection in writing. In Taczak's threshold concept, she explains that "Writers develop and improve with practice, time, and—among other things—reflecting throughout the process. Reflection is a mode of inquiry: a deliberate way of systemically recalling writing experiences to reframe the current writing situation" (Taczak, 2016, p. 78). Specifically, Taczak focuses on how reflection is a huge factor in the development of writing. Taken together, these studies point to the importance and need for reflection in the writing process of L2 students.

This essay enhances and synthesizes these scholarly studies and research. It examines how L2 students define and use reflection in their writing practices by constructing and conducting two separate interviews with two L2 students. Likewise, this essay will use Kelly's, Taczak's, and Down's discussions as lenses to discuss findings from the interviews as their ideas are truly strengthened and echoed in my findings. For instance, the findings of this research show and further contribute to scholarly conversations on how to define reflection, when and how reflection occurs, all of which make reflection very difficult to recognize and assess, especially for L2 students (e.g. Kelly, 2016; Taczak, 2016). Likewise, other research findings further emphasize the importance of revising and the difficulty L2 students face with revising their writing (e.g. Downs, 2016). These aspects are vital to the success of L2 students in their development of writing. This essay first presents and analyzes the findings and then synthesizes those findings with the various outside research to effectively build the foundation of the idea on how L2 students define and use reflection in their writing. This essay will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. How do students who are from outside the U.S. (L2 students) define reflection in writing?
2. How do students who are from outside the U.S. (L2 students) use reflection in writing?

### Methods

Since this research focuses on L2 students who are from outside the U.S., I had two students who learned English as a second language participate in structured interviews designed to comprise questions that would help me find out how L2 students define and use reflection in their writing. The first interviewee was Mahshad, who is currently a freshman at the University of Louisville. She was born and raised in Iran and the first language she learned was Persian. She came to the U.S. when she was 12 years old where she learned English in school. The second interviewee was Amanda, who is also a freshman at the University of Louisville. She was born and raised in Cuba and the first language she learned was Spanish. She came to the U.S. when

she was 13 years old, learned and became fluent in English after she was enrolled in school in the U.S. Notably, both participants learned English around the same time of their education.

The interviews were structured around the L2 students and their use of reflection in their writing. First, in order to get more of a sense about them as L2 students, I asked questions about where they were from, what language they learned first, and when and where they learned English. Then I continued by asking questions about their general idea of reflection, words associated with reflection, and experiences with reflection. These questions were used to get a sense of their current knowledge and perspective of reflection in general. Then I continued to ask more detailed and elaborate questions about reflection specifically in writing, exposure and experience to reflection in writing, and the comparison of the usage of reflection in writing between their home country and in the U.S. Most importantly, I asked how being a student whose primary language is not English has affected their reflection in writing. Overall, the level of detail for these questions progressively increases throughout the interviews.

After interviewing the two participants, I listened to both interview recordings and transcribed them. By doing this, I became more familiarized with the participants' responses and realize the most important points that were made that correlated with how L2 students define and use reflection in writing.

### Findings:

First, I interviewed Mahshad from Iran, after which I interviewed Amanda, who is from Cuba. Both interviewees said that back in their home countries, they only learned the basics of English language in school but were not fluent at all. They became fully capable of carrying out full conversations after their arrival in the U.S. and learning English language in school.

When discussing what reflection in general means to her, Mahshad explained: "When I think about reflection, I think about looking back at the past. Looking back at a situation and evaluating what happened and how that affected and made me into the person that I am today." She furthers by discussing her experiences with reflection saying:

"Well for reflection in general, I took English classes in Iran and that really helped me. The classes that I took there, when I moved here, I was proficient enough that I didn't have to take many ESL courses. So, in that sense I reflect on how helpful those basic English classes were to me."

Likewise, Amanda had a similar idea about what reflection in general means to her. She elaborated thus: "Reflection is basically learning from past life experiences. When I think about reflection, I usually think about revising, thinking, learning, and remembering". She continues by discussing her experiences with reflection stating,

"So, in my first English paper for English 101, we had to write a story about our lives or an experience that really impacted us. So, I wrote about how my sophomore English teacher helped me have confidence in myself because she picked my article out of the whole class to post on the school's newspaper. Her picking my article, really inspired me and gave me confidence and made me realize that, 'Oh, maybe I can be a good writer in English!'"

Both interviewees seem to correlate reflection in general with looking back at life experiences and evaluating those past experiences. They not only identify what happened in the past but also evaluate and analyze how those past experiences affected them. So not only *what* those past life experiences are but also *why* they are so important to them. This idea is also furthered by Kara Taczak's threshold concept. Taczak avers that "Reflection centers on writers' ability to theorize and question areas such as their processes, practices, beliefs, attitudes, and understandings about writing, along with the ability to consider why they made the rhetorical choices they did" (Taczak, 2016, p. 78). In other words, not only do the interviewees identify *what* area exactly has affected them, but also *why* exactly that area has affected them. This ability to theorize is very

important in various situations, but also specifically in writing. However, in the case of these interviewees it took some time and prodding for them to talk about reflection as linked to their writing. This is significant because it suggests that they may not have had an efficient amount of experience with reflective practices in their writing process.

In discussing Mahshad's understanding of reflection, specifically in writing, she responds thus:

“When I had to write a research paper, we had to do two (2) drafts before turning in the final draft. In the first draft we would look back at our writing and look at what things we did not include and revise it—to make it better. Some of the revisions I made in my writing were like changing the structure, transition, and flow of the paragraphs. Also, I would revise to correct grammatical and spelling mistakes.”

Similarly, when asked about her understanding of reflection in writing, Amanda simply responded that: “In the sense of actually reflecting on one of my pieces of writing, I usually just revise it.”

It is evident here that both interviewees have a similar understanding or idea of what reflection in writing means to them. It seems that they tend to correlate reflection in writing with revising and making simple corrections in their writing. They seem to interchange the meaning of revising with their meaning of reflecting. It appears that when they reflect on their writing, they just make revisions on the structure, grammar, and spelling of their writing. They have a local/novice understanding of what reflection and revision are in writing. Their understanding of revision is limited to mere editing of drafts. Doug Downs' threshold concept attempts to put the idea of revision in proper perspective by denoting that “to create the best possible writing, writers work iteratively, composing in a number of versions, with between each for reflection, reader feedback, and/or collaborator development. The revision implied in this process is central to developing writing. Revision here is distinct from line editing or copy editing to ‘polish’ a text,” (Downs, 2016, p. 66).

In other words, global/proficient revision deals more with the significant development of a text's ideas and concepts. It does not necessarily focus on the editing of grammar, spelling, or structure of the writing. The development of content and ideas are far more essential to a text than those minor revisions.

This idea is also examined in Lauren J. Kelly's article. Kelly notes that “an assumption made about multilingual students is that they are more likely to spend time on micro-level linguistic improvements in their written work.” She further examines instances where researchers have shown that L2 students' focus might remain on lower order concerns such as grammar, instead of higher order aspects such as persuasiveness, noting that “this focus on ‘error-free composing’ is not the best method for improving their writing” (Kelly, 2016, p. 231). This also explains the tendency of the interviewees to interchange the meaning of revising and the meaning of reflecting in writing. The L2 students focus mainly on surface-level issues like grammar, spelling, and word choice rather than the overall significance of their writing. They correlate reflection in writing with making simple revisions and polishing their writing.

From the foregoing however, there is a possibility for a link between students' experiences with reflection and the kinds of revisions they make in their writing. Taczak does acknowledge that “revision, which includes some amount of failure, becomes particularly helpful when writers reflect and learn from these experiences” (Taczak, 2016, p. 79). This means that reflection plays a big role in helping writers make revisions. Perhaps, both interviewees' reflecting process could be modified in order for them to account for more global/proficient revisions in their writing.

When asked whether reflection is a common writing process practice in her home country, Mahshad explains thus: “From the time I was in Iran, kindergarten to 6th grade, reflection was not emphasized as much and it was not really important.” Likewise, Amanda's response to the same question goes thus: “I mean back in Cuba, it was not really common. Maybe, since I left during

middle school, it would have been more important in high school or in college. But since I was in 8th grade, it was not really emphasized as it is here.”

Both interviewees said that back in their home countries, reflecting in writing was not as emphasized as it is here in the U.S. However, this could be due to their education levels (elementary and middle school) when in their home countries. This means that they were not properly exposed to reflection in writing back in their home countries. However, there is a possibility that if they had continued to high school or college, they might have been introduced to reflection in writing.

In the discussion about Mahshad’s thinking process during reflection in writing and the language used in these writing processes, Mahshad states: “I would say English mostly because I think in English. Now, I use it more than Persian. I reflect in English. It is just more natural now to use English in writing.” Amanda describes a similar experience: “I get the most of my thoughts out in English. So basically, in most of these situations I primarily use English because it is just more natural. Even though I had more experience with Spanish and using Spanish, it is easier to use English in these writing situations.”

Both interviewees primarily use English for writing, thinking, and reflecting because it feels more natural to them now that they are proficient in the language. Even though they had an immense amount of time using their first language growing up, they now reflect more clearly in English. Not only that, but both interviewees were exposed to reflection in writing in the U.S., a factor which played a big role in why it seems more natural to reflect in English. Since they were exposed to and taught about reflection in writing in the U.S. in English, even though English is their second language, it is easier for them to understand and evaluate reflecting in English.

Correspondingly, Lauren J. Kelly’s article discusses similar ideas that I also found in both interviews. Kelly acknowledges that “cultural differences and lack of training could negatively impact the process of reflection,” (Kelly, 2016, p. 231). This possibly explains why it seems difficult for both of the interviewees to fully understand reflection in writing. Not only is it due to poor exposure and introduction to reflection in writing, but it may also be due to their cultural differences. It seems that both interviewees were introduced to reflection in general in their home countries, but they were not introduced to reflection in writing. Even though they were exposed to reflection in writing in the U.S., it seems that it was done in a poorly manner because of their tendency to interchange it with just making novice revisions. Nevertheless, being from outside the U.S. and having different cultures could possibly have an impact on why they think about reflection in writing the way that they do so. For their reflective practices in writing, these L2 students only identify the *what*, but do not identify the *why* they have made those alterations in their writing, even though those alterations are at a novice level. Overall, the debate over the definition of reflection, when and how it occurs, makes reflection difficult to recognize and assess, especially for L2 students.

## Conclusion

Ultimately, this essay enhances and synthesizes Kelly’s, Taczak’s, and Down’s studies in order to address how L2 students define and use reflection in their writing by constructing and conducting two separate interviews with two L2 students. This idea is also effectively illustrated in Kelly’s experiment with a small-group tutorial program for L1 and L2 speakers at a large research university. In her experiment, Kelly found that “L1 students were more likely to elaborate (on holistic concerns) and that L2 students were more likely to remark on micro-level improvements than L1 students. However, L2 students were also almost as apt to discuss macro-level developments as L1 students,” (Kelly, 2016, p. 237). Similarly, my two interviewees seem not to be fully aware of also considering the bigger picture in terms of their writing. They have only commented on micro-level improvements focused on grammar and error-finding. It might take more practice for L2 students, but it is truly possible for them to be proficient in using reflection in their writing. As Kelly notes, the similarities between L1 and L2 students are encouraging because

they suggest that L2 students are truly as competent as L1 students when it comes to critically thinking and reflecting in their writing, (Kelly, 2016, p.237).

Additionally, the methods used to encourage reflection have often been questioned and debated, and students usually tend to consider the process of reflection difficult. Thus, this leads to a large spectrum of inquiry. For example, what is the most appropriate method to be used in order for L2 students to be properly exposed to reflection in writing? How can students determine which strategy is best for them to improve their reflection process? The increase in inquiry calls for further exploring and experimenting. For instance, there could be more studies, similar to Kelly's, observing numerous students to learn more about what other methods and elements are used in order to become proficient in reflective writing. Kelly's research is just one of very few studies that directly compares the reflections of L1 and L2 students.

Therefore, more research like this needs to be conducted in order to determine if students are more likely to reflect in similar or different ways and to further discover methods that could improve their reflective practices during the writing process. This could also be enhanced by teachers. Teachers could express what they learn through their own reflective writing processes with their students. They can make the attempt to showcase various methods to help the students with their writing. Teachers can possibly also repeatedly imply the importance of reflecting about past experiences which may help students come across and use new methods of reflecting in their writing. Specifically, ESL teachers have an important role in the development of L2 students' ability to be proficient in their reflective writing. Hence, ESL teachers could also be a central focus for future research.

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## Appendix: Interview Questions

1. Where did you grow up? What was the first language you learned? When did you learn English?
2. What words would you associate with reflection?
3. What are some of your experiences with reflection?
4. Have you been asked to reflect on your writing before? Either in a class or other context? What did that look like?
5. How common was reflection in writing back in your home country?
6. When it comes to reflection in writing, what's your thinking process like? What language do you usually use in these writing situations?
7. What are some similarities/differences you have seen between reflection in writing back home and here in the U.S.?
8. Has being a student, whose primary language is not English affected the way you practice reflection in your writing? How so?