

## Ethnographic Writing: A Model for Second Language Composition Instruction

- In a variety of fashions, ESL student writers can learn to work along the lines of a practical-theoretical continuum in the ethnographic model of writing. They can (a) draw on what they know or what is accessible to them; (b) expand upon their knowledge by reading, observation, and discussion; (c) describe a set of concrete facts in the practical text component of their work that captures or shows the salient issues they want to write about; and (d) extend their discourse into new areas of analysis in the theoretical text component through reflection and by interpretation of the meaning of the actions, events, stories, or cases presented in the practical text. The end result for students is greater knowledge, of not only language, but themselves and the world.

### INTRODUCTION

Ethnography, originally defined as the anthropological study of culture in small, preliterate societies (Diesing, 1983), has gradually expanded its domain over the years to include the study of individuals and cultures in larger, literate societies. Watson-Gegeo (1988) points out that today ethnography is viewed as a rigorous and systematic study of people's behavior in naturally occurring settings. Such investigation includes an account of what people do, a description of the ways they interact, and an interpretation of the meanings these interactions have for them. She notes "the cultural interpretation of behavior" is the focus of ethnography (p. 576).

A recent innovation in second language instruction has been the incorporation of techniques and principles of ethnography into an educational context (Enright, 1988). The goal of this innovative approach is to help students learn language by teaching them to become ethnographers in their own communities and schools. And when this ethnographic approach is successfully implemented, the educational results can be dramatic (see, for example, Heath, 1983). Recently, Johns (1988) has extended this ethnographic approach to education to university-level ESL classes. However, both practical and theoretical constraints of this process of turning students into ethnographers need to be fully considered.

As a practical matter, many ESL instructors—including those with a genuine interest in doing ethnography in their classes—may be unable to make the commitment to changing their classes or instruction in the dramatic fashion ethnographic approaches require because they face constraints imposed by existing programs, policies, or supervisory/administrative personnel. Other second language instructors may feel intimidated by the demands of time they perceive an ethnographic approach would necessitate. Furthermore, ESL teachers who are considering having their students do ethnography must be prepared to address and resolve certain theoretical limitations, especially those drawn from the field of ethnography. Rist (1980), for instance, cautions against what he terms “blitzkrieg” ethnography, a notion caricatured by Schultz (1983): “I hung around the principal’s office for two days and eavesdropped on some conversations” (p. 6). Spindler (1982) adds that the application of ethnographic methods by those with limited understanding of the field creates a “fad,” not the kind of disciplined fieldwork conducted by ethnographers. Deising (1983) discusses the serious problems faced by unprepared or biased observers.

Given the practical and theoretical constraints of converting entire classes of student writers into novice ethnographers, is ethnography fundamentally incompatible with approaches to ESL composition? The answer is no. The fact is that ethnographic writing can be viewed as a multifaceted discourse model (Geertz, 1988; Clifford, 1986) and, subsequently, can be considered as something quite different from actual ethnographic field research. ESL teachers need not be trained anthropologists to utilize ethnographic models of discourse in their writing classes. Interested ESL composition teachers can incorporate many ethnographic techniques and principles into their classroom instruction by simply recognizing that ethnographic writing provides comprehensible models of discourse and a viable alternative—or supplement to—traditional ESL writing instruction. And this ethnographic model can be utilized within existing curricula and without excessive demands on the teacher’s time.

### **Ethnography and Writing**

Perl (1983) points out areas of similarity between writing and ethnography. She notes both are recursive processes which emphasize learning by doing. Each leads to discovery by exploring different forms of discourse and different points of view. Writing and ethnography are also human modes and essentially rely on trust. Perl points out that in writing, as in ethnography, meaning emerges from repeated reflections on observations.

Five aspects of an ethnographic method of inquiry cited by Kanton, Kirby, and Goetz (1981) are highly relevant to language teaching and learning, especially to writing. These are its concerns with (a) a hypothesis-generating process of discovery, (b) the use of specific

features of language contexts, (c) the thick description of phenomena, (d) a role for a participant observer, and (e) the importance of making meaning.

Furthermore, various techniques used by ethnographers to collect data can also be effectively utilized in writing classes (Bird, 1987; Rowe, 1986). These include observation, field notes, interviews, use of informants, study of records and artifacts, video or audio recordings of subjects, and diaries. The examination of data from multiple perspectives used in ethnographic research, Liebman-Kleine (1987) points out, can also be beneficial to student writers. As Schultz (1983) eloquently puts it:

By attempting to understand the world from the point of view of others, we gain an appreciation for multiple interpretations of the same reality, and in fact, of multiple realities, rather than being blinded by or forced to live by only one. (p. 26)

In the next section of the paper, a number of rhetorical devices drawn from ethnographic writing will be presented and their applicability to second language composition instruction discussed. However, what underlies each of them—and makes them relevant to writing instruction—is the notion, as Schultz succinctly puts it, that “ethnography is not simply a technique, but rather a way of understanding and making sense of the world” (p. 6). The challenges that face inexperienced ESL writers, therefore,—particularly those in academic settings—are not at all dissimilar to the challenges which face a novice ethnographic writer.

### **Ethnographic Models of Writing**

Berthoff (1984) provides a rationale for an ethnographic model of writing. She states the crucial issue directly—theory and practice need each other. She points out

there is rarely any attempt to demonstrate the relationship of observation to interpretation or logical analysis or narrative, or indeed to anything we do with language. (p. 3)

Making explicit the relationship of the practical and the theoretical is the cornerstone of an ethnographic model of writing. For Mohan (1986), demonstrating the relationship of observation to interpretation means “going from practical understanding to theoretical understanding” (p. 100), or more precisely, going from a specific case to the background knowledge about a topic each case represents. The essential components of an ethnographic model of writing are presented in Model 1.

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TOPIC  
CASE  
BACKGROUND INFORMATION  
EVALUATION

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Martha, from California, begins a paper on self-esteem by describing the case of Veronica. The purpose of the case in this student's writing is to show rather than tell what she wants to say before providing background information on her general topic and attempting an evaluation of the issues Veronica's case represents.

Veronica is one of several millions that suffers from low self-esteem. Veronica has suffered many ordeals throughout her life. As a baby, Veronica was never claimed by her father. At age eight, Veronica's mother abandoned her for a while. As a teenager, Veronica and her mother were constantly moving. With her friendly personality, she has no trouble meeting people, yet traveling caused her to leave many friends behind. Traveling also caused Veronica to switch from school to school. When she would begin learning new material, it would be time to move again. Her academic ability decreased, even though she is a bright girl.

Recently, Veronica noticed that Alicia, the girl who has been her best friend, is trying to change her into someone else. Veronica also noticed how Alfred, the boy she has been dating for two years, did change her. He would constantly tell her she was fat, ugly, and unwanted to the point she began to believe it herself. Veronica's mother now constantly pressures her to find a husband and move out.

Veronica realizes that these incidents have left her confused, sad, and angry. She admits that she has a low self-image of herself, but this is the first step in improving her self-esteem.

Because the practical component of her paper (the case) illustrates or exemplifies the very concepts or issues to be discussed in the theoretical (or the background information about a topic), the theoretical becomes more accessible to the student writer. And the practical is better understood—or understood in new ways—because of the student's greater understanding of the theoretical. This greater understanding of an issue enables a student to assign meaning and make evaluations about the topic.

In the first excerpt below, taken from her paper on the homeless, Heang, a Cambodian refugee, integrates her firsthand knowledge of homelessness and background information on the general topic. As a result, she has a greater understanding of the practical and

theoretical. Similarly Nancy, in the second excerpt, combines observations and descriptions of her mother and background information about the topic of arthritis. Her mother's daily life is seen in new ways and better understood by the student writer as a result.

It took us six months to walk back to Cambodia from Thailand. On our way, my family had no place to stay at night. My father just built a small tent for our family to stay in each night. Sometimes, when it was raining, all of our things got wet because we didn't have enough space to cover everything. Sometimes we passed by a village. We asked the residents if we could stay at the side of their house overnight. Some of them were nice and would let us stay for the night. Some people didn't even look at us when we asked them if we might be allowed to stay there. They just ignored us. So we kept going until we could find a place to settle down for the night. That is why when I read the article in "The Bakersfield Californian" about the homeless and when I saw them on the street I felt sorry for them.

In the United States the total homeless population has increased from 250,000 to 3 million since 1980. Many are young, chiefly minority men without jobs and education. Women are turning up on the street in large numbers too because they couldn't get help from family or friends. Now families are appearing in emergency shelters and on the road. Some of the homeless stay in parks, cars, and parking lots. Some dropped out because they did not have enough education or the experience or skill to get a job. Some ran away because they could no longer deal with things at home. Some had no income and no place to go. Even though homelessness in America is not as bad as homelessness in Cambodia, the U.S. government should help the homeless by building more public housing.

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The sound of my mother's hands patting and kneading dough lingers vividly in my mind. She grabs a small amount of dough and rolls it into a ball. As she picks up the rolling pin, she sprinkles flour on the dough and begins to roll out small balls of dough into thin, flat, round tortillas. She stops a moment and gently rubs her hands. Her once beautiful hands have been deformed due to her large swollen joints. She walks over to the medicine cabinet and picks up a bottle of medication. Push down and turn, the phrase on the cap reads. This simple task is almost impossible for her to perform. She calls out my name and I help her by taking off the cap. Even though I cannot feel the pain she experiences, I have extreme sympathy for her. This pain is caused by her inflamed joints, arthritis.

Arthritis affects about 37 million Americans. That's one in every seven people, and one in every three families. People of all ages, including children and young adults, can develop arthritis.

Spradley (1980) makes a point about ethnographic research which is equally relevant to student compositions: "Although you will want to make generalizations during your research, it is necessary to begin with concrete facts that you can see, hear, taste, smell, and feel" (pp. 68-69). Inexperienced student writers and novice ethnographers face a similar task. Both must, in their own way, learn to deal with the most specific, concrete human events as well as with the most general. Spradley, like Mohan, believes that maintaining a strict separation between practical and theoretical components adds depth and substance to a study. Spradley illustrates how these practical and theoretical elements operate in a text and how they are related in ethnographic writing.

We identify an infant with a specific name, held by a specific mother, nursing at that mother's breast, as a specific time and place. In these same field notes we make observations about human love, nurturance, and the universal relationship of mothers and children. (p. 162)

Spradley makes quite clear the purpose "concrete facts," or practical text, serve in the ethnographic model: "In order for a reader to see the lives of people we study, we must show them through particulars" (p. 162). By this he implies that the most important level of ethnographic writing is this level of practical text, or, in ethnographic terminology, "specific incident statements," which

take the reader to the actual level of behaviors and objects, to the level of perceiving things. As a reader you immediately begin to see things happening, perhaps feel things the actors feel in the situation. Instead of merely being told what people know, how they generate behavior from this knowledge, and how they interpret things, you have been shown this cultural knowledge in action. (p. 166)

Spradley's caveat is equally relevant for ESL writers: "A good ethnographic translation shows, a poor one only tells" (p. 166).

## **Model 2. Spradley**

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**PRACTICAL TEXT**  
(Showing Cultural Knowledge in Action)

**THEORETICAL TEXT**  
(Generalized to Wider Contexts)

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Drawing upon his own observations and experience, Albert, a college freshman, clearly shows farm workers' lives in this passage of practical text from one of his compositions.

At about 4:30 in the morning workers begin to awaken. Some get up hesitantly and others are prepared to face another day of work. Most usually have a small breakfast and then change into their working clothes. Everyone wears long-sleeve T-shirts to keep the dust and sulfur off. Workers either drive to the grapevines or get picked up by a van with other workers. When they arrive at the grapevines, some wait in the van to rest, while others go to their assigned packing tables to prepare. They prepare by getting packing boxes, packing curtains, lids, and paper cushions.

At 6:00 a.m. the foreman honks the horn of his car, like a whistle or a bell would sound in a production line of a manufacturing company, to get the workers started. One group of workers usually consists of three people: one person packs the grapes, the other two pick and bring grapes to the packer using a wheelbarrow. Every worker has a clipper, which is used to clean and trim the grape bunches. The types of grapes workers pick depend on the variety grown in the area. The varieties range from green Thompson's to purple-red Flames and dark purple Rivers, as well as other lesser varieties.

During the morning you can hear the workers talking across one row of vines to the next. At first the workers start off slow, but soon the sun takes away the bite of the morning chill and the pace increases.

Creating a practical text helps students not only understand theoretical issues better, but also shape and form text because it is an act of structure formation, that is, organization. Like the ethnographer, to create the practical text, ESL student writers must first select and then represent in a concrete way the salient issues or themes they want to discuss in their composition. By providing evidence instead of merely explaining, ESL students become better writers.

Morgan and Engel recommend that "careful distinction be made between the description of data and its interpretation" (p. 176). This same distinction has been made by Bartholomae and Petrosky (1986), who encourage students in first language writing classes to distinguish between evidence and explanation.

We want you to be able to distinguish in your paper between writing that is evidence (here we are referring to the stories you wrote about yourselves) and writing that is explanation (here we are referring to why you chose the stories you did and what points you want to illustrate with them. (p. 117)

### Model 3. Bartholomae and Petrosky

#### EVIDENCE

#### EXPLANATION

Because the practical component, or evidence, in student writing is based, at least initially, on the writer's own experience, second language students can learn this evidence-and-explanation process of constructing, ordering, and interpreting text. Two immigrant students, Nancy and Miguel, use accounts of personal experience as evidence in the practical text portion of their composition. Their papers show how practical situations can illustrate a general topic, in this case, the adjustment problems of bilingual children.

#### Que Dice?

I recall seeing my father with that blank expression on his face. I have seen it so often, that empty child-like look. His eyes glaring down at me crying out for help. Me, his 10-year-old daughter whose English pronunciation is just beginning to develop. "Que dice?" he asks. Quickly, I begin to translate each word the doctor said to me into Spanish, carefully selecting each word so my father could understand. That night my grandmother had grown ill, and my father and I rushed her to the hospital. Being the only one who spoke English and Spanish, I naturally became the translator. I was frightened, confused, and angry. I was just a 10-year-old child. I should not have been forced under all that pressure.

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On Monday morning [his first day of school in the United States], I went to the class I was assigned to. My third grade teacher was Mrs. Smith and she was in her late 30s. She asked me for my name, but I did not understand her. I was also too shy and nervous to speak. Everyone was laughing at me. I felt very miserable and a total failure.

The teacher, seeing that I didn't answer because of my lack of English, demoted me back to first grade. She hurt me very much with that decision. I bet I could have learned the English language very fast if she would have given me an opportunity to show what I did know. Mrs. Smith expected me to know English, but how could I if I just came from a place where they speak nothing but Spanish. Just because I couldn't understand her at that time she demoted me in grade. She thought I didn't have the reasoning skill, intelligence, and mentality of a third grader.

While ethnography differs from merely living through and recalling experience (Soven, 1979), an ethnographic model of writing, like the Language Experience Approach, does enable students to begin with what they already know. In the process of learning writing structures that they are unfamiliar with, students can build upon their own prior knowledge and past experience. The purpose of the ethnographic model of writing is to help second language students make sense of the world, not to teach them to conduct scientific research. Again Schultz' comments about ethnography are highly relevant to ESL composition instruction.

In ethnographic inquiry, the emphasis should be on the latter half of the endeavor-inquiry—and the raising of questions about the way the world works. Then it becomes simultaneously a reflection on the assumptions we hold about the nature of that world and the ways with which we view it. (p. 8)

The crucial concept for ESL teachers and their students to understand about an ethnographic model of writing, as Geertz (1973) points out, is that a "good interpretation of anything—a poem, a person, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society—takes us to the heart of that of which is the interpretation" (p. 18). What the practical text component makes clear is that the student writer, like the anthropologist, should "approach such broad interpretations from the direction of exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters" (p. 21).

#### Meaning Making

In both ethnography and student writing, the process of interpretation that occurs is directly tied to meaning making. Geertz goes so far as to state that "whatever, or wherever, symbol systems may be in their own terms, we gain access to them by inspecting events, not by arranging abstract entities into unified patterns" (Geertz, 1973, p. 21).

Two student papers on abortion illustrate this access to meaning by inspection of events. Solange, after presenting the case of a 16-year-old friend who decided against having an unwanted child, argues persuasively in the body of her text for women's right to choose in such instances. She concludes with this statement of understanding.

After reading so many books on abortion, I realize now that my friend made the right decision because she wasn't ready to have a baby then. I can't imagine her taking care of a baby without any money or support from her family and friends. Since she was so young, she wasn't ready for a big step like raising a baby because she couldn't even take care of herself. My friend is married now and has a child. Seeing them so happy together makes me very happy. My friend told me that she

doesn't have any regrets about her decision because she is so happy now and has a wonderful family to take care of.

Yvonne, a returning student, had an abortion when she was 18. After presenting her own story as a case, she describes her experiences in the hospital and argues persuasively against abortion.

The first thing the nurse had me do was strip and put on a gown with an opening in the back. She took me to the operating room and put me on the table while she got everything ready. I do remember asking the anesthesiologist not to put me to sleep. I wanted to feel the pain to realize the full impact of what I was doing. He told me he could put me to sleep or give me a local anesthesia, which would lessen the pain to an extent. I chose the latter. After a few minutes, I heard the sound of a machine being turned on. It sounded like a vacuum cleaner...I still remember the sound of that machine fourteen year later.

Just as the procedure began, I remember a nurse came over to the table and held my hands. At first, I thought she was holding my hands as a gesture of sympathy, but soon I realized she was holding my hands so I wouldn't grab something I shouldn't. I remember the nurse making a comment to me that I was hurting her hands by squeezing them too hard. I thought to myself: Too damn bad, how do you think I feel?

After a few minutes that seem like hours, the abortion was over. The nurse led me to a room full of women; some were lying on beds asleep, others were awake. Some of the women were crying softly. Others were laughing and joking, perhaps to make light of their real pain, or maybe they were numb to it all. I remember I didn't cry, I couldn't.

It's sad looking back on the experience. The emotions I now feel I couldn't feel fourteen years ago. I now have strong convictions and feel what I did was wrong. What I thought was the answer to my problem really wasn't.

For the ethnographer and the student writer, "analysis is (or should be) guessing at meanings, assessing the guesses, and drawing explanatory conclusions from the better guesses" (Geertz, 1973, p. 9). The importance of this meaning-making process should not be underestimated in ethnographic or student writing.

Theory serves in ethnography and student writing, as Geertz puts it, "to ferret out the unapparent import of things" (p. 27). Arief, a freshman from Indonesia, makes just such an extension to a wider context in his paper on general education.

Looking at the purpose of general education courses offered by California State University, Bakersfield, I understand how important general education is for all students. Although some of the courses are not related to our majors, general education

courses help us understand the basic knowledge that will be important in our future life. In these courses, all undergraduates hone their basic skills—writing, speaking, critical thinking, and mathematical reasoning—and we have experience with the sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. By the time we graduate from this college, we do not just know the knowledge of our majors but also the other knowledge we learn from general education courses. We will know our society more thoughtfully, apply the knowledge to the society in which we live, communicate with other people more fluently, and think more critically.

Clara, a Salvadoran, in a paper on the recent amnesty program in the United States, presents in detail the case of a college student who flees El Salvador because he has become a target for arrest or execution by the right wing, yet who fails to qualify under the conditions of the new amnesty law. She describes the problems such illegal aliens and their families face here. And in doing so, she extends her analysis to the widest possible context.

Thousands of people like them are currently in this situation . . . If they stay in this country illegally, they don't have a chance of getting a job. Everywhere they apply, they are turned down because they don't have a work permit. If they return to their country, they face arrest, prosecution, or even execution. I know this is a real possibility because my own father was murdered in El Salvador.

There has to be a way to help these people because we cannot send them back to where they came running from. There has to be justice, and as citizens of this country we have to help those who need our help. Many times we say that the law is the law. But we have to begin to think of the law of humanity and the law of God. We need to consider what these people have gone through in the past, and they should be given the right to live in this country without being persecuted or oppressed. After all, that is what they came here to get away from.

Building upon prior knowledge, past experience, the familiar, or the practical and concrete to reach unfamiliar, abstract, and theoretical domains is essential in an ethnographic model of student writing because it makes writing, especially academic writing, a meaning-making process which is entirely under the individual student's control. And through this meaning-making process ESL students close in on the key aspect of any writing event: They come to realize that practical and theoretical text are comments on more than themselves. Students learn in their own written work that "where an interpretation comes from does not determine where it can be impelled to go" (Geertz, 1973, p. 23). Or, as Geertz succinctly, but eloquently, notes, "small facts speak to large issues . . . because they are made to" (p. 23).

### Using Analysis of Fairy Tales

Parkhurst (1988) shows how students can make interpretations through the analysis of fairy tales. Second language writers can practice, as Geertz puts it, "ferreting out the unapparent import of things" in analyzing fairy tales because the tales contain cultural values or messages which can then be interpreted by students in their writing. For instance, students can present a fairy tale from their culture and afterwards identify and analyze the cultural messages contained in the tales. From such analysis, ESL writers can generalize to make interpretations about their society or culture.

#### Model 4. Parkhurst

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##### PRESENTATION OF FAIRY TALE

##### IDENTIFICATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE CULTURAL VALUES IN THE TALE

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##### INTERPRETATION OF SOCIETY OR CULTURE

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Eventually, both student writer and ethnographer must, as Spradley notes, "learn to shift back and forth between the concrete language of description and the abstract language of generalization" (p. 69). However, this distinction, or that between the practical and the theoretical, or between description and explanation, should be seen as relative—not absolute. It is a continuum "between getting down the meaning social actions have and stating, as explicitly as we can manage, what knowledge thus attained demonstrates" (Geertz, 1973, pp. 26-27).

#### Ethnographic Writing as Allegory

Clifford (1986) takes this notion of the relativity of the practical and theoretical even farther, claiming that ethnographic writing is allegorical. He illustrates his approach by analyzing Shostak's (1981) study of Nisa, a !Kung woman, in particular Shostak's vivid and moving account of !Kung childbirth.

The story has great immediacy. Nisa's voice is unmistakable, the experience sharply evoked . . . But as readers we do more than register a unique event. The story's unfolding requires us, first, to imagine a different *cultural* norm (!Kung birth, alone in the bush) and then to recognize a common *human* experience (the quiet heroism of childbirth, feelings of postpartum wonder and doubt). The story of an occurrence somewhere in the Kalahari Desert cannot remain just that. It implies both local cultural meanings and a general story of birth. A difference is

posited and transcended. Moreover, Nisa's story tells us (how could it not?) something basic about woman's experience. Shostak's life of a !Kung individual inevitably becomes an allegory of (female) humanity. (p. 99)

Clifford argues that these transcendent meanings are not merely "added on" to the original "simple" meaning; they are the very conditions of its meaningfulness. Clifford adds that

once *all* meaningful levels in a text, including theories and interpretations, are recognized as allegorical, it becomes difficult to recognize one of them as privileged, accounting for the rest. Once this anchor is dislodged, the staging and valuing of multiple allegorical registers, or "voices," becomes an important area of concern. (p. 103)

The practical and theoretical components, therefore, are not, in fact, distinct entities, though they may be presented separately in a student composition. Clifford's conclusion has great relevancy for an ethnographic approach to ESL composition, for it provides not only justification for student voices, but a tangible goal for their writing: "Whatever else an ethnography does, it translates experience into text" (p. 115).

#### Model 5. Clifford

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##### ALLEGORY

(Telling a story to help us see  
the cultural norms in  
particular actions or events)

##### INTERPRETATION

(Discussing the universal  
qualities of that story)

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Heath (1983) describes the practical and the theoretical in an educational context as bidirectional, and she articulates the challenge students face in manipulating them.

The key objective of this two way manipulation of knowledge . . . was to translate knowledge familiar in one domain into the other (unfamiliar) domain. Students move between the personalized, orally expressed knowledge of the home to the depersonalized, decontextualized, primarily written knowledge of the classroom. (p. 321)

The end result is that students become aware "that participation in both domains is viable for the individual, and features of one domain can be used in the other" (p. 324). Heath's analysis again makes clear that when familiar experience is used to help students

understand the theoretical, their new understanding, in turn, changes their perception of the familiar or practical. Thus, the practical becomes the students' means to interpret the theoretical; and the theoretical sheds new light upon the familiar or practical and places it within a larger context. This process can be seen in the conclusion of Albert's paper on farm workers.

At the end of the workday, the last of the grapes are packed, and workers tally up their bonuses. On a good day, when the grapes are nice and clean, an entire crew can pack four thousand boxes of grapes. When all the grapes are packed, the workers mingle among themselves as they walk to their cars to begin their drive home.

Field workers may not receive the respect that executives, doctors, or lawyers get, even though they may work as hard and make an honest living. Field workers, like all people who work, should be treated with respect and decency. In the spring of 1968 Cesar Chavez fought a battle for the rights of field workers. Yet his sacrifice was not just for field workers. It symbolized a fight for all people who have been treated unfairly on the job. Today, the war rages on. The war is now against the use of harmful chemicals, which have caused sickness to befall field workers. Until all people are treated fairly and work in an environment that is not detrimental to their health, the war will never cease.

The accessible, the known, and the familiar come to be seen as real, meaningful parts of a new, broader context for student writers. And this is crucial because

it is by weighing, evaluating, and comparing the relationship of new and old information that comprehension of the author's message, refinement of ideas, and acquisition of new learning takes places. (Langer, 1982, p. 153)

In the following suggestion to beginning ethnographers, Schatzman and Strauss (1973) summarize how the ethnographic model of writing works. It is also counsel well suited to ESL writers.

We urge the novice in analysis to convert relatively inert abstractions into stories—even with plots—in order to induce themes and models that link datum to datum. Better still, he might go directly to the data. This way, the analyst escapes the formal stereotypes inherent in the concepts; he deals with very human and live phenomena that are amenable to story making and probably productive of new constructs. The story line can always, later, be reconstructed to formal terminology, should the analyst find it necessary. In the meantime he deals comfortably and naturally with what appears only as description and illustration, but which is only a short distance conceptually from

generalized social process. (p. 121)

Schultz discusses the characteristics of such stories. He contends these stories should be written in everyday language about the lives of participants. He claims the stories will "provide raw material for reflection, analogies, and thinking on the part of educational practitioners" (p. 24). They will also require skills usually associated with writing fiction.

These stories should be rich in the commonplace details of everyday life, leaving out as little as possible regarding the actions, thoughts, perceptions, and feelings of the actors. They should leave the reader with the impression of having been there, of having known the participants and having understood what they were trying to do. (p. 24)

Converting the observations or abstractions into stories, action situation, or cases and, afterwards, linking that data to formal terminology or background information is how an ESL student can use the practical and theoretical text components in the ethnographic model to create meaning in writing. In fact, covering Schatzman's and Schultz's "short conceptual distance," or more precisely, helping students cover that short distance from description to generalization, becomes the fundamental objective of a teacher using an ethnographic model of ESL writing. ■

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*Raymond Devenney is a lecturer in the Department of English and Communications, California State University, Bakersfield, where he teaches ESL and developmental writing classes. He has also taught ESL to high school, community college, university, and adult second language learners in Honolulu, Boston, and Colombia.*

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