

Modifying Reading and Writing Theories for the Writing Center: A Practical Guide for Tutors of ESL Students

Introduction

Over the past century, scholars have paid great attention to the ways English-speaking students learn to read and write in classroom settings. However, native English speakers only account for a portion of students enrolled in American universities. While both ESL and English-speaking university students must read similar texts and produce similar forms of writing, the former group's process is drastically different; ESL students must learn to operate within new academic and cultural conventions. In this paper, I examine the practices of prominent composition scholars – Wolfgang Iser and Ann Berthoff – to determine how their theories can be transferred to the tutoring of ESL students in university writing centers. To do so, I adjust the methods according to two variables: learner and setting. The learner becomes ESL writers at the university level. The setting transfers to a writing center context – one-on-one tutor and tutee sessions – rather than individual or classroom settings. This paper is intended to help writing center tutors establish the ideal tutor-tutee relationship, and then use this relationship to facilitate the most effective ESL tutoring sessions.

In the first portion of my paper, I examine Iser's reader response method to establish the ideal roles of tutors and tutees. When a reader studies a text, Iser suggests they form an aesthete-artist relationship with the text. First, I define the artist and aesthete in terms of both individual and writing center settings. Likewise, I establish two definitions of "interactive." Since the artist and the aesthete embody different roles in a writing center setting, interaction also takes on

different meanings depending on the ultimate goal. Therefore, I draw upon Joseph Williams' Little Red Schoolhouse method to define the writing center's goals.

In the second part of my paper, I analyze Ann Berthoff's textbook, *Forming Thinking Writing*, to determine how tutors can help ESL tutees form the clearest concepts in their writing, while still maintaining an aesthete-artist relationship. This section contains sample charts ESL writers may utilize to form concepts, as well as tutoring tips for enabling tutees' understanding and retention of these concepts.

Reader Response

In his 1972 article, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach," German literary scholar Wolfgang Iser describes his influential reading method, reader response. He is considered one of the founders of the method, which is still predominately used to teach reading in schools. While it was intended as a means to approach literary texts, reader response principles also can be applied to academic settings, as is the case at the writing center. In Iser's practice, the role of the reader is inseparable from the role of the writer. The roles form a literary work's "two poles, which we might call the artistic and the aesthetic" (Iser 279). These roles are also present in writing center sessions, taking the forms of tutor and tutee.

Iser's Artist and Aesthete

Iser wrote for an audience of readers whose task was to evaluate literary works. We must assume that Iser's readers work with unchangeable, published texts; that evaluation signifies a change in the way the readers interpret the works, not a change in the works themselves. Such literary works, as previously mentioned, have artistic and aesthetic poles. "The artistic refers to the text created by the author, and the aesthetic to the realization accomplished by the reader"

(279). As in writing center sessions, Iser's method is a two-party interaction; however, Iser's scenario defines the two parties as the text and the reader, the artist and the aesthete respectively. The text is the artist because it creates the reaction. The author already receded from the work, producing an unalterable copy to interact with readers. The reader is the aesthete because he makes judgments about the artistic work. The reader response method requires the interaction of the artistic and the aesthetic because "the convergence of text and reader brings the literary work into existence" (279). Though the roles of artist and aesthete have been established, it is also necessary to define their interaction.

Iser's Interaction

Iser considers interaction to be when the reader forms connections with other parts of the text, uncovering deeper content and thought. "As the reader uses the various perspectives offered to him by the text...he sets the work in motion, and this very process results ultimately in the awakening of responses within himself. Thus, reading causes the literary work to unfold its inherently dynamic character" (280). Here, Iser suggests that readers can spur the text to life, set it "in motion." He goes so far as to imply the text can become humanlike, a "dynamic character." Interaction is the process of turning a text from a static entity to a breathing life form. The interactive process is reflexive. Iser suspects that the more a reader can bring a text to the life, the more he himself comes to life throughout the reading process.

One may wonder how aesthetes bring texts to life. Iser answers this question with his theory of anticipation and retrospection. Anticipation is the aesthete's prediction of what is to come next in the text. "Every sentence contains a preview of the next and forms a kind of viewfinder for what is to come" (284). However, the reality of the text does not always meet our

anticipations. The act of responding to an unanticipated moment in the text is called retrospection. “The act of recreation is not a smooth or continuous process, but one which, in its essence, relies on *interruptions* of the flow to render it efficacious” (293). It is like tripping an alarm and setting off the warning signals. Iser also refers to this process *Satzdenken* or sentence-thought, a phrase originally from Roman Ingarden’s 1968 *Vom Erkennen des literarischen Kunstwerks (Cognition of the Literary Work of Art)*. Ingarden says, “Sentences link up in different ways to form more complex units of meaning that reveal a very varied structure... If this complex finally forms a literary work, I call the whole sum of sequent intentional sentence correlatives the ‘world presented’ in the work” (29). The goal of retrospection is to awaken this sentence-thought and bring the work to life.

In Iser’s method, retrospection is prompted by anomalies in the text, “interruptions of the flow.” “If the reader were given the whole story, and there were nothing left for him to do, then his imagination would never enter the field” (280). In literary texts, Iser generally deems these interruptive moments necessary, engaging readers and avoiding “the boredom which inevitably arises when everything is laid out” (280). An example of such a moment can be seen in the first three lines of T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”: “Let us go then, you and I,/When the evening is spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherized upon a table” (Eliot 1-3). Readers anticipate a romantic poem from the title and the mention of the evening sky. Readers also anticipate the sky to be described as, say, beautiful and glistening, based on other love songs they have previously heard. Therefore, when they encounter a morbid description of the sky in place of the expected romantic metaphor, the line sets off their warning bells. The anomaly of the “patient etherized” spurs the process of retrospection as they question its purpose

in the poem, considering that the poem may not be a love song at all. Iser would deem this an interactive moment with the text.

The Writing Center's Artist and Aesthete

Iser states that reading should be the “unfolding of the text as a living event” (296). If the reader pursues an interactive process, the lifeless pages may appear alive. At the writing center, both artist and aesthete are actually animate, and able to engage in more traditional interactions. The artist is the tutee, the text's creator. The aesthete is the tutor, responding to the text. Here, the reader is separate from the aesthete, a distant third party. The reader is likely a professor, admissions board, or employer – the text's ultimate audience.

Frequently, the two scenarios form one continuous process. The student often begins an interaction with a published text. Then, his interactive analyses from the first stage form the content of his own writing in the second stage. Throughout the process, the student's role shifts from aesthete to artist. First he responds to someone else's work, and then he produces his own work. In the second stage, the tutor takes over the role of aesthete, just as the student now fills the artist's shoes.

Interaction At The Writing Center

Since the artist is present during writing center sessions, the aesthete does not need the text to fill their absence. The aesthete interacts with the artist, not solely the text. Sessions *are* living events, not recreations of them. Already, interaction at the writing session exhibits new possibilities that are not feasible when the aesthete investigates a text in isolation.

The aesthete has a different goal in the writing center than in Iser's scenario. In the writing center, the aesthete's responsibility is to the artist, not to the text. Iser's scenario assumes that the text is in ideal, published form. However, artists (tutees) bring their work to the writing center because they want to improve it. The work is not in completed form. In these instances, anomalies will likely cause problems in the reader's understanding, rather than spur a moment of deeper clarity. Lack of clarity (akin to Iser's "anomaly") is a deterrent in academic writing, instead of a catalyst as it is in literature. Joseph Williams, prominent scholar of professional writing, claims that "clear writing" should be determined relative to the aesthete not the artist (the reader not the writer). His Little Red Schoolhouse curriculum, developed in 1980, serves to heighten writers' understandings of clear writing by placing them in the shoes of the reader. Some core principles of Little Red Schoolhouse include:

- 1) Readers come to any text with a fairly predictable set of questions and expectations.
- 2) Effective writing anticipates and responds to these predictable questions and expectations.
- 3) Students who come to understand readerly expectations and writerly routines produce more persuasive arguments more efficiently (Penn State University).

Like Iser, Williams also calls for the act of anticipation. However, Iser considers anticipation to be an aesthete's role, pairing the task with retrospection. Williams focuses on the artist's anticipation, and would consider revision to be the counterpart equivalent to retrospection. A fourth principle outlines the aesthete's role, according to Williams:

- 4) Most students already have good intuitions about what readers want and what writers do: our [educators] job is to help them articulate and define those intuitions, so that they can more consciously control their writing (PSU).

So by combining the artistic and aesthetic roles of Iser's theory with the academic parameters of Williams' method, we arrive at a practice applicable for the writing center. Whereas Iser prompted aesthetes to use anticipation and retrospection to improve their understandings of a text, Williams prompted artists to use anticipation and retrospection to improve the clarity of their own text. In the writing center, the aesthete uses anticipation and retrospection to improve the clarity of an artist's text.

Academia values thoroughly conclusive essays. In the upcoming sections, I will determine methods for the aesthete (tutor) to "articulate and define those intuitions [of what readers value], so that they [tutees] can more consciously control their writing." These intuitions are less accessible to ESL students who, as previously stated, are learning to operate within new academic and cultural conventions. When working with ESL students, the tutor may need to take a more intensive approach to help students define readers' anticipations. The tutor's role in a session is to model the process of anticipation and retrospection so that the tutees will become familiar with the process and eventually be able to duplicate it without the help of a tutor.

Applying Anticipation and Retrospection to Writing Center Sessions

During writing center sessions, tutors commonly employ a method of anticipation and retrospection to make quick decisions about which conventions render discussion. Composition theorist Ann E. Berthoff's 1978 book, *Forming Thinking Writing*, offers methods that, when adjusted for a writing center setting, may be useful for identifying and categorizing these worthy topics of discussions. Berthoff's book is intended for composition instructors who seek to improve the clarity of their students' writing. (Here we can still use Williams' definition of clarity.) Therefore, her artist and aesthete most closely align with those of the writing center, in

comparison to the roles established by Iser and Williams. Though her concept formation methods were not specifically intended for ESL artists, they are applicable nonetheless. Berthoff's practices most usefully transfer to tutoring ESL students because speakers of other languages must bridge the largest gap between thought and form. Thought is the ideas and arguments students produce about a writing topic. Forms are the means (often specific vocabulary) a student uses to effectively communicate their thoughts to readers. Berthoff says that composition is a matter of "learning how to use the forms of language to discover the forms of thought and vice versa" (46). ESL students often have a plethora of thoughts but not necessarily the forms. Writing center tutors can utilize Berthoff's methods of concept formation to help these students bridge the gap between thought and form.

Berthoff's process can empower ESL tutees to form concepts of English composition scenarios. This should lead to the tutee's self-sufficiency, and he will be able to more easily recall the phrases and structures appropriate for a given writing task. I investigate how tutors can utilize Berthoff's models in three writing center scenarios:

- 1) The tutee is familiar with the concept but must find the appropriate forms to express his thoughts
- 2) The tutee is unfamiliar with the concept
- 3) The tutee has already given form to the concept, but leaves room for improvement

Tutors should use anticipation and retrospection to determine when the student's work exhibits any of the above scenarios. When they encounter an anomaly that does not match their expectations, tutor should use retrospection to identify which scenario they must address. The following sections will outline each scenario and how tutors can facilitate students' improvement accordingly.

Finding the Forms For A Concept

In order to form concepts, writers must consider the latent implications of the words, or classes, they use to communicate their ideas. “A concept is a surname: logicians define a class as ‘the field of a concept’s application.’” (83). Berthoff illustrates this sentiment with the concept of a marsh, which can either be classified as a swamp or a wetland. A native English speaker, who was exposed in various contexts to the terms marsh, swamp, and wetland, can easily detect the negative connotation of “swamp” and the more positive connotation of “wetlands.” The former term would be used by someone in favor of developing the area, whereas the later term would be used by someone in favor of preserving the area. Thus, two concepts of marshes are formed:

Speaker	Interest of speaker (from his/her POV)	Concept	Class/Surname
Businessman	Progress	Worthless land in current condition	Swamp
Birdwatcher	Conservation	Area vitally important to the ecological system	Wetlands

However, English learners are less likely to be aware of the terms’ latent implications, having less contextual exposure to them. Dictionaries or thesauruses do not convey such subtle distinctions between similar terms. For example, a wetland is defined as “land consisting of marshes or swamps.” Since both of the alternate classes appear in the definition, it would be impossible for a language learner to select one over another. Their latent implications are not apparent. However, writers with a deep understanding of their words’ latent implications compose the strongest academic papers:

As you compose statements, what you want to say and why you want to say it determine how you name the classifications you are developing in the process of forming concepts.... The way a writer names the classes is one of his or her chief means of expressing judgment, of implying evaluation; the naming of classes is an essential phase in the making of meaning (112).

In other words, even individual words (classes) can convey as much meaning as entire sentences. Therefore, it is a tutor's job to acquaint tutees with the implications of classes relevant to their tasks.

Concept formation that encapsulates subtle distinctions between classes may require external input, such as a writing center tutor, to add meaning to the form. Research on language acquisition also suggests that external feedback heightens learner's formation of concepts. In Barry McLaughlin's 1990 article, "Restructuring," he explains that "the second language learner faces essentially the same task as his or her first language counterpart – that is to acquire successfully the target language system on the basis of underdetermined and often deficient input" (McLaughlin 404). Writing center tutors (or professors) can serve as the supplier of the target language system, which may also be construed as the concept formation.

I experienced the benefits of external input while tutoring an ESL business major. For her business communications course, the student needed to act as a HR representative supplying employees with good news. The following week, she would have to complete the same task, except supplying bad news. She wanted to use the phrase "you should" to call for employee action in the good news memo, but use the phrase "you must" in the bad news memo. These phrasings appeared in her notes from class, a differentiation supplied by an English-speaking professor. Though both forms of command, the phrases have latent implications. Once the

professor introduces the phrases' latent implications, the language learner can form concepts around them.

Creating a table similar to Berthoff's would help the ESL tutee retain the new concept formation. I would recommend the tutee keep a journal of sorts, a table that can always be expanded as the student expands her understanding of the concepts. In a way, her note-taking format already indicates a concept-forming thought process, classifying phrases based on situational parameters. The ideal table would appear as follows:

Context	Concept	Class
Work Environment	Command (Forceful)	You must
Work Environment	Command (Recommended)	You should

For ESL tutees, generalized categories would be more practical to expand their knowledge of the “field of a concept’s application.” Allowing for multiple terms to fit one class will leave the student with multiple word choices when composing. They need to know when or where the phrase should be used (i.e. a business setting) and what it is used for (i.e. to forcefully command). Ideally, the tutee should eventually gain many classes for each specific scenario (i.e. forcefully giving a command in a work environment). As she investigates the conventions of the scenario – through writing center sessions, the classroom, or personal interactions – she may eventually add phrases such as “you need to” and “you are required to” alongside the forceful work command she already knows. The chart will become a repertoire of language connected with its latent implications, a source for ESL writers that conveys what dictionaries do not.

Finding the Concept

In the previous scenario, the tutee was already familiar with the context of her assignment. She knew what a Human Resources representative is and basic details of the work environment. However, some ESL tutees are not that far in the composition process; they may not understand the context or concept, requiring more extensive input from the tutor. In these instances, the tutor invites the tutee “to explore for themselves how discovering the parts and developing ways of bundling them are interdependent operations” (Berthoff 3). Developing and bundling forms should be an interactive conversation between both parties, though the tutee should record his findings in a journal, eventually committing them to memory for future use.

One writing center session, a Chinese ESL student struggled to write a business analysis of the McDonald’s cooperation. She had little knowledge about the fast food industry, and the little exposure she’d had in China created a concept different from the American concept of McDonald’s. In her hometown, McDonald’s is considered a trendy, Western dining experience. Guided by the student’s questions, we spent the whole session developing the concept of McDonald’s and comparable restaurants. It is important the questions came from the tutee because guidance “should be substantial and pointed but not exhaustive, and it should assure that students have experience of mastery as a safeguard against frustration” (4). Trying to compose about a topic you do not understand in a foreign language definitely counts as a frustration that tutors can help ESL tutees avoid. Additionally, “‘Pre-writing’ is writing...getting started is as important a phase of composing as getting it together and getting it finished” (3). Therefore, tutors should not be apprehensive to spend a session talking through a topic, as long as the learner mainly guides the discussion. It is not unproductive, and not taking the composition

process away from the student. Rather, it is a beneficial means to guide the student in an informed direction.

To avoid the pressure of leaving the session with a perfectly organized chart, I would encourage the student to write down any important phrases (classes) as they come up. The initial table may appear as follows:

Fast Food	McDonald's	Hamburgers
	French Fries	Cheap
	On-the-go	Wendy's
	Burger King	Middle and lower classes
	Teenagers	Drive-thru

Though appearing disorganized, this table contains key phrases and ideas (classes, which form concepts) about fast food restaurants – menu items, clientele, chain names, etc. These are ideas that will commonly arise in the student's paper.

Now that the student has a broad understanding of the topic, we can begin to bundle, sorting the parts based on usage and connotation. Many of these terms are neutral, such as hamburgers and French fries. These do not need to be resorted (as they are appropriate for all scenarios). This does not mean the terms are wasted space, however. The student can still refer back to the original table for general vocabulary on the topic. Terms that do have latent implications should be added to a second chart. A new chart may appear as follows:

Context	Connotation	Class
Fast Food	Pricing (positive)	Inexpensive Reasonably-priced Affordable
Fast Food	Pricing (negative)	Cheap

Now, the student has a list of words for inexpensive pricing (both positive and negative) that can be used in a plethora of other contexts. The tutor should indicate if any of the words are only applicable to the original context, which is not the case in this example.

In summation, the first table includes various terms that may be utilized throughout the essay. As the student recalls the new words throughout the writing process, her recall time will decrease until the term and its usage is fully committed to memory. “Repetition is, after all, a fundamental aspect of form” (5). The second table contains terms that can be used to communicate a specified connotation in relation to a concept. The tutor may spend time during the session conveying more information about the terms than is present in the table. For example, I would explain that “cheap” also implies bad quality. The student should take notes as needed. Depending on the length of the session, the second chart can either be created during the session or by the tutee at home to review what was discussed. When she composes sections about fast food pricing in her essay, she will have multiple words from which to choose. Based on the tutor’s previous guidance, the student should have an idea of which adjective is the most fitting.

Improving a Formed Concept

Sometimes an ESL tutee will come to a session with a paper already composed. This displays the tutee’s understanding of the composition’s context and appropriate vocabulary to accompany it. However, the essay likely contains some misused or vague words, frequently verbs. The thoughts have form, but the meaning is not totally conveyed. Since the tutee has already given form to the context, the tutor can most improve their composition by addressing specific moments in the text. A misused word within an essay indicates the student’s attempt to utilize knowledge gained from the previous two scenarios (even if not formally completed),

though there is a more expressive alternative. As tutors, we want to address the misunderstanding without discouraging students from trying new words. Our main goal is to maintain the writer's autonomy, while providing additional input for improvement. My favorite phrase in these instances is, "I am curious about this word." Curiosity conveys interest rather than disapproval. It shows a desire to investigate the student's meaning further rather than disregarding their meaning as incorrect and replacing it with our own. This is a moment of aesthete retrospection. Prompting the student to also consider his meaning makes finding the right word an interactive process for him. "If you only learn what you are told, then you are only keeping in mind, for a longer or shorter interval, what was put there by somebody else. What you really learn is what you discover – and learn to discover by questioning" (9). The tutor's questioning leads to student discovery. The tutor proves that thought is embedded in word choice – that words are not concrete, but have meanings that can be pondered, debated, and discussed.

I also like to voice my thought process, or process of retrospection, verbalizing the possibilities I am deliberating between. I may voice the following thoughts: "I'm considering if we can find a more descriptive word here" or "I'm wondering whether to switch the order of these sentences or leave them as is." When tutors express a deliberation between multiple options, they prove that there are in fact *multiple options* in composition. Again, it shows that the writer was not wrong, but that there are other possibilities for expressing the idea. Even the experienced tutor must sort through forms. "Since the active mind is a composer, there's something to be learned by observing it in operation" (12). Berthoff suggests that writers observe their own mind, but inexperienced writers (in English) may benefit from observing the process of someone more experienced. Being introduced to the fact that processes exist may spur learners to find their own.

In one instance, an ESL student brought in a creative piece with vague verbs. To express an action performed in rage, he wrote, “She poured the water on the floor.” “Pour” indicates an understanding of water (the context) but not the latent implications of the verb. Pour is too calculated and calm of an action for this scenario. I asked, “I am curious about this word. What did you mean by pour?” The student explained that the woman in the passage is angry so she is making the water go on the floor. I suggested the word “splashed” instead, explaining it connotes anger, and the student agreed it better captured his meaning. Here, I prompted the student to reconsider his thoughts. Then, we reconsidered the original verb to determine if it conveyed his meaning. When the student decided it did not, we investigated the meaning of other possible words. Together, we observed the process of making meaning. A chart similar to the ones proposed earlier may be employed in this instance. “Spill” is likely to come up in this search for the right word, and though it is not the best choice in this instance, it still has a valuable place on the table.

Context	Concept	Class
Liquid/Beverage	Emptying a container (intentional/forceful)	Splash
Liquid/Beverage	Emptying a container (intentional/docile)	Pour
Liquid/Beverage	Emptying a container (unintentional)	Spill

The final table that I will present encapsulates specific verb usages, useful for ESL students that bring in papers with vague or incorrect verbs. ESL tutees often need assistance in this area, favoring boring verbs over more descriptive ones. Let’s take a resume for example, because it requires frequent and powerful verbs, without a need for diverse sentence structure.

Oftentimes I'll see an overuse of "do" verbs and phrases like "Did research." To arrive at more telling verbs, a chart that pairs the verbs with corresponding nouns should be made.

Verb	Noun
Conduct Perform	[An] Experiment Research

Now if in the student writes about an experiment or research, he knows he can pair the nouns with "conduct" or "perform." The outcome is similar to those achieved with the previous charts. The writer expands his concept of experiments – that they are conducted or performed. This time, the new forms are especially practical for composition because they provide a grammatical structure for the thoughts.

In addition to the verbs and nouns, any article or preposition necessary to connect them should be included, as ESL students often struggle with these aspects of grammar. In this example, experiment must always have an article (unless plural). Therefore, the article is indicated in brackets. ESL tutees will commonly ask, "Do you say conduct a research?" to which the answer is no. Therefore, an article is not indicated on the chart. Repeatedly referring back to the chart should eventually commit to mind these seemingly arbitrary grammatical conventions, eliminating the English learner's confusion.

Conclusion

In this paper, I examined literary scholars' theories on reading and writing, pinpointing and altering the components of their works most applicable for writing center sessions. In the practice I developed from this examination, the student begins the composition process as an uncertain artist writing in isolation. He is unable to perform a process of anticipation and

retrospection because he does not know what his reader expects. ESL students frequently lack adequate knowledge to anticipate the terms, connotations, or grammar expected to convey a concept. After brainstorming or drafting an idea, the ESL student brings the result to the writing center, where the tutor becomes the aesthete, modeling his own process of anticipation and retrospection. With the help of the methods and tables in the previous sections, the tutor will ideally inspire a reflexive process. Referencing the notes and tables from the session, the tutee can become his own aesthete, maintaining a self-sufficient process of anticipation and retrospection.

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