

# **WRITING FOR SCHOLARLY PUBLICATION**

## **BEHIND THE SCENES IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION**

*Edited by*

**Christine Pearson Casanave**  
*Teachers College, Columbia University*  
*Tokyo, Japan*

**Stephanie Vandrick**  
*University of San Francisco*



2003

LAWRENCE ERLBAUM ASSOCIATES, PUBLISHERS  
Mahwah, New Jersey London

## A Scholar on the Periphery: Standing Firm, Walking Slowly

Miyuki Sasaki

*Nagoya Gakuin University*

At 5:30 a.m. on February 11th, 1998, our 3-year-old daughter, Tomo, lost consciousness, and was taken to the hospital by an ambulance that my husband had called. She had been sick for 2 days before that, and her temperature had gone up to 40 degrees centigrade during the previous night. I had taken her to a doctor the day before and had given her the medicine the doctor had prescribed, but it did not improve her condition. Until that day, nobody around her, including the doctor, had known that Tomo had a bad case of influenza. I remained at home with our 2-month-old son, Shou, when Tomo was taken to the hospital. Shou was also showing several bad symptoms, indicating that he might have the same illness as his sister, but at least he was still conscious. Even though I was coming down with the same illness myself, with a high fever and a throbbing headache, I still had to take care of him. It was the longest day of my life. Tomo did not regain consciousness for half a day. The doctor later explained that it was possible that the influenza virus had spread to her brain, perhaps having caused her unusually long loss of consciousness. Lying on a *futon* at home, suffering from the continuous throbbing of a severe headache, in my feverish thoughts I was thinking that Tomo was the last thing I wanted to lose in my life. Later on that day, Tomo regained consciousness, but she was still in critical condition. To make matters worse, Shou became so sick the next day that he had to go to the same hospital. Both of our children were in the hospital for 3 weeks.

On that day, it seemed like I was suddenly forced to pay all the debts I had accumulated during my life. Earlier in the previous year, I had been

asked to give a plenary talk at the third Pacific Second Language Research Forum (PacSLRF) in March. It was the first time I had ever been asked to give a plenary talk at an international conference. Because I had just given birth to our son 2 months earlier, I had not been able to prepare for the talk as much as I had wanted. I was hoping to do most of the preparation during the following month. Then, that day, February 11th, came. With a 2 month old and a 3 year old in the hospital, and in light of my own very weakened condition, I wondered if I should cancel my talk. After long consideration, however, I decided that it was too close to the conference and too irresponsible for me to cancel the talk at that point. My name was printed on the PacSLRF flyers that had been distributed 8 months earlier. But after I made that decision, I had to think about how I could manage to prepare my "debut" plenary talk well enough. Now that I think about it, I cannot really recall how I did it. I don't think I was able to prepare to the extent I had hoped, but a month later I did go to Tokyo and I did give the talk. I am thankful for my husband's help, which allowed me to take time to prepare for the talk, but still I remember clearly how trying it was for me to get over my own illness while taking turns with my husband and the babysitters to take care of our children 24 hours a day (which included sleeping on the floor beside their beds) at the hospital for the 3 out of the 4 weeks before the conference.

That experience became a turning point in my life as a researcher. After that, I decided to avoid every possible situation where my life as a mother (and often as a wife) would conflict with my life as a researcher. I learned that being torn between my family and my work is the last thing I want to do. Even before that experience, I was not a very active researcher. I liked what I was doing as a researcher, but I also liked to enjoy my life as a teacher, a wife, and a mother. Especially after our first child Tomo was born in 1994, it had become difficult to be very ambitious as a researcher, whether I wanted to be or not. Because it was (and still is) very rare for a full-time professor to also be a mother at our university (I was actually the first and second person to take maternity leave among the 108 faculty members in the 35-year history of our school), I tried very hard not to make my being a mother an excuse for being unable to function as a full-time teacher. I made every effort not to cancel my classes and to attend all faculty and committee meetings. I tried to make myself available to my students whenever possible. But still, it was impossible for me to put in as much time as I did before our daughter was born. She was sick almost every other day until she was 2 years old. She often didn't want to go to the daycare center and wanted to stay with her mother. I myself wanted to enjoy the precious short period of my daughter's infancy. And my life became even busier after her brother was born in 1997. I wanted more time for everything: raising the children, teaching, doing administrative work, and writing papers.

Canagarajah (1996) reported that researchers in developing countries live in the "periphery" (p. 442) world where "difficulties in getting publications from the outside world, coupled with the unusual delays in receiving mail, greatly reduce access to recently published scholarship" (p. 448), which makes it very difficult for those researchers to publish in mainstream international academic journals. Compared with those in such environments, as a researcher I have lived under much better circumstances that have provided easier access to current publications from the outside world, an efficient mailing system, sufficient "telecommunication facilities and funds to travel" (Canagarajah, 1996, p. 448). And yet I have often felt that I have suffered from difficulties similar to those of the "periphery scholars" (p. 450) because I was unable to use the facilities available since becoming a mother. In this sense, I may have been living on the periphery of the research world after our children were born. Until the day Tomo lost consciousness, however, I had tried hard to work as normally as possible in spite of such unfavorable circumstances. I didn't want other people to think that I had become an incompetent researcher after becoming a mother.

On February 11th, 1998, however, my value system changed. I realized more clearly than before that I could not be happy if my interests as a researcher conflicted with those as a mother and a wife. Trying to do the best possible research while keeping up with the most recent research trends is a good thing to do *only if* it does not get in the way of my life as a family member. And so I decided to slow down the pace of my research even more, but this time I didn't feel frustrated. I knew that this was a decision I made myself and that I could not be happy living my life any other way. Although I admire some of my friends who regularly get their papers published in prestigious journals, organize discussion sessions at conferences, and are involved in research projects with distinguished scholars, I don't have to be like them. For now, I would like to do what is most satisfying in my life, that is, being a good member of my family and writing a good research paper once every year or two (in this sense, I am thankful for the fact that, as is typical at Japanese universities, the university I work for does not have a strong "publish or perish" policy). If I became more ambitious, I would inevitably risk putting myself in a situation like the one I found myself in on that fateful February day, a situation that I hope to avoid for the rest of my life.

Residing in the "periphery" is not such a bad thing, however, and I often wonder why people want to be in the "center" all the time. Being in the center must have its own sources of frustration and disadvantages, too. If I were given enough time to do whatever research I liked with ample (and technically highly advanced) resources to search for the most current related literature, I might be too overwhelmed by the pressure to produce the best kind of research in such an ideal situation. Being invited to work with internationally well-known scholars is exciting, but I might be pres-

sured and frustrated by the fact that I could not work as efficiently as the other members of the team (this has happened to me before). Furthermore, living in a geographically "peripheral" world has provided me with several opportunities (discussed later) to notice things that might not be noticed in the "center," that is, "North American and Western European locations" (Canagarajah, 1996, p. 436). Thus, I enjoy living on the periphery now. I don't know what other people might think about my way of living, but at least to me it is comfortable and worthwhile. In this sense, I am a believer of two teachings of Laotsu: "Those who stand on tiptoe cannot stand long, those who walk with long strides cannot walk far," and "Nothing including what people call goodness and beauty is certain, and it is wrong to be tied to one value system (Kanaya, 1997, p. 81 and p. 18, respectively; the interpretations of the original Chinese sayings were in Japanese and were translated into English by Miyuki Sasaki).

For the past several years, then, I have done my research at my own pace (I never work after 6 p.m. on weekdays and Saturdays, and I never work on Sundays) and have submitted papers for publication as frequently as is comfortable for me. I would now like to write about one of those experiences because the process of doing research and submitting a paper to a journal has been an essential part of what has made my life as a "periphery scholar" happy and worthwhile. The process is long (especially because I work slowly and because I mainly work in English, my second language) and sometimes discouraging (especially when I get rejection notices from journal editors), but I have learned so much in the process, and in the end it is always rewarding in some way, even when the paper is not accepted by the journal in which I originally hoped to be published. I hope that my story will encourage other researchers like me who are forced to live on the periphery of the academic world.

I would like to write about what happened regarding my plenary talk for the third PacSLRF (which I had to prepare during that very tense time after my daughter lost consciousness), because it represents the most recent and typical process of my research work. On March 28th, 1998, I presented a paper titled "Toward an Empirical Model of the L2 Writing Process" (Sasaki, 1998). As I wrote in Sasaki (2001), I had been interested in second language (L2) writing for quite a while by then (partly because I had to struggle so much to be able to write in English myself). I first investigated what factors influenced the quality of Japanese students' expository writing in English in Sasaki and Hirose (1996). I wanted to know "what makes a good L2 writer." Having realized that there was no analytic scale to measure Japanese as a first language (L1) compositions available for that study, my coauthor and I also developed such a scale ourselves through multiple stages of validation (Sasaki & Hirose, 1999).

I then became interested in the *process* by which the quality of such compositions—that is, the writing *product*—is achieved. I searched through pre-

vious studies that examined writing process in the fields of both L1 and L2 and realized that many of the studies used what is called a "think-aloud" method to collect the concurrent writing process data. Although it is true that it is practically the only way to investigate what a writer is thinking about while writing, I, as an L2 writer myself, wondered whether a method that forces writers to talk aloud about what they are thinking might not excessively disturb their writing processes. I tried the method on myself and could not complete the task. I asked some of my undergraduate students to do the same. None of them completed the writing task in a satisfactory manner. I realized that the think-aloud method could not always be applied effectively with all types of participants and that it may not be the best method for collecting data from Japanese participants who, so it is said, live in a society where silence is valued (Ishii, Okabe, Kume, & Hirai, 1990). Thinking back on this now, I arrived at this insight because I teach English in a foreign language situation (i.e., where it is not used outside the classroom as a means of communication). As I mentioned earlier, being on the periphery can work as an advantage sometimes!

In search of an alternative way of examining an L2 writer's thinking process, my former coauthor, Keiko Hirose, introduced me to a very promising method that had been developed by Anzai and Uchida (1981) for Japanese L1 writers. Having realized that it was difficult to collect concurrent think-aloud data from Japanese child participants (again, this problem may be culturally rooted), Anzai and Uchida conducted a careful and well-designed empirical study and developed a method for collecting retrospective protocol data that can provide detailed information about what a participant is thinking about while writing. Because the participants were asked to talk just after they had written the first word of the compositions and just after they finished writing, while looking at the composition they had just written, their writing process was not greatly disturbed. They were asked to explain what they had been thinking about at each pause longer than 2 seconds, which had been hand-recorded by a research assistant sitting beside the participants while they were writing. Because a writing process is a continuous and diffusive act, I thought that asking the participants what they had been thinking about every time they stopped writing was a good way of probing their thinking process.

Having been impressed by the high-quality research conducted by Anzai and Uchida (1981), I started to look at other studies published in the *Japanese Journal of Educational Psychology*, where Anzai and Uchida had contributed their study. This process opened a new world to me. I was amazed by the richness of the accumulated knowledge based on the long history of scientific research in the field of Japanese educational psychology. As in the papers written by the "periphery scholars" discussed by Canagarajah (1996), the results of these studies were reported in the local language, Japanese, and thus were difficult for scholars in the "center" to



get access to. I regretted that I had mainly looked at studies written in English when I had conducted background literature reviews for the previous papers I had written. Just as Canagarajah lamented the limited distribution of papers contributed to the local journals in Sri Lanka, it would be a pity if researchers outside Japan could not enjoy this treasure trove of knowledge accumulated through Japanese researchers' hard work. But I also felt that this isolation could be an advantage for a researcher like me who could read both English and Japanese: I could learn and cite from literature written in both English and Japanese.

Using the method developed by Anzai and Uchida (1981) for Japanese children was a big success. All of the participants in my pilot study, including a few very shy students, contributed ample data for analyzing their writing process in detail. On the basis of the pilot study results, I also revised Anzai and Uchida's method to better fit my own L2 participants. I used a video camera to record the participants' writing behaviors, including their hand movements, instead of just recording their writing behaviors while sitting beside them. Watching the videotapes of themselves writing and looking at their compositions helped the participants remember what they were thinking about at each pause better than if they just looked at the compositions they had just written.

Having gained confidence in the effectiveness of the main method I would use, I proceeded to conduct the main study in 1996. I investigated the writing processes of four Japanese EFL (English as a foreign language) writing experts (defined as those whose "professional work included regularly writing English research papers while their life was anchored in Japan" [Sasaki, 2000, p. 265]) and eight Japanese EFL writing novices cross-sectionally and longitudinally (before and after 6 months of process-writing instruction). Partly using the coding scheme developed by Anzai and Uchida (1981), I looked at the participants' writing fluency, the quality and complexity of their written texts, their pausing behaviors while writing, and their strategy use. While I was doing a background literature review for this study, I had noticed that there were very few studies that investigated EFL writing experts. Because, by definition, the experts did not live in the center of the academic world, where English is used as a major means of communication, it might have been difficult for the center-based researchers to get access to them. Here again, periphery researchers like me may possibly have an advantage over center-based researchers.

It took me the whole year of 1996 to collect the data from the eight novice writers, and Keiko Hirose provided me with the data from the four experts. Then, in 1997, I started to analyze the data. In the beginning of that year I agreed to give the plenary talk at the third PacSLRF in March 1998. I decided to talk about this analysis of Japanese EFL learners' writing process. Because it was the first plenary talk I had ever been asked to give, I had to gather all my courage just to agree to the invitation

to give the talk. I wanted to give a good talk based on good analyses. However, the year of 1997 turned out to be much longer and harder for me than I could have imagined because I gave birth to our second child at the end of that year. Throughout my pregnancy, I was sick. I had to analyze the huge piles of transcribed data in a very weak condition while taking care of our then 2-year-old daughter.

It was just 2 months after I gave birth to our son that the terrible day in February came. I tried my best to prepare for the talk, and at the last minute I jumped on the train for Tokyo (I was in such a hurry that I even forgot the memo that had the name of the hotel where I would be staying that night. I had to call home to find out what it was.) The talk went reasonably well, I thought. On the stage, wearing a pink suit and smiling bravely during my talk, I felt strange that nobody but Setsuko Miyamoto, a friend of mine who came with me from Nagoya because she was worried about my health, knew of my long and hard struggle to get there. To the participants, I was just one speaker who could be easily replaced by somebody else. To them, it was just a 45-minute talk, but to me it was a 2-year-long struggle to stand on that stage.

Just after the conference was over, the new school year started at our university, and I did not have time to write a paper from the speech draft until the summer vacation started that year. To me, writing a presentation draft and writing a paper are two different things. My presentation drafts are usually much shorter and simpler than my written papers. For the former, I only highlighted several points that I thought would be appealing to the audience. When I rewrote the presentation draft for the plenary talk, I had to look at all the data again and add many more details. I also added some additional results from analyses I didn't present in the talk. Because I had by then decided to take my time when working on my research, I worked slowly. During that time, I also had to take care of my baby son and 3-year-old daughter and my husband's sick parents, who had come in the summer of that year from their hometown to stay at a hospital in Nagoya.

The paper, somehow, was completed at the end of December 1998. It took me about 10 months to complete it. I then sent it to Carol Rinnert, an applied linguist whose work I respect very much. She often reads my papers and gives me insightful comments while correcting grammatical errors. After having studied English for almost 30 years, I still make numerous grammatical errors in English, even after I rewrite the draft many times; I need my grammar checked every time I write in English. But Carol does much more than that. As an excellent applied linguist herself, she checks the overall organization and coherence as well as the validity of the content. I am lucky to have several friends like Carol who read my papers both as native speakers of English and as researchers. This time, too, Carol gave me many helpful comments on my paper, and I revised it addressing them and sent it to the *Journal of Second Language Writing (JSLW)* on January 23rd, 1999.

Then, at the end of July 1999, I received a letter from the *JSLW* editors. I always feel very tense when I open a letter from the editor of the journal to which I have submitted my paper. I have to take a deep breath before I open it. I opened the envelope and skimmed the cover letter. The sentence "one reader calls for acceptance with revisions; the other, rejection" jumped out from the page. The letter further said

Because we feel that a well revised version of this paper could make a contribution to the research in second language writing, we would like to offer you the opportunity to revise and resubmit your manuscript for further consideration, with the understanding that this offer implies no obligation on our part to publish a revised version of this paper.

I wonder what other people would do after reading such a response. I must admit I am a coward in this respect. I could not read the reviewers' comments (especially because I was afraid of those from the reviewer who had rejected my paper) for a while, remembering how hurt I have felt after reading such rejection letters in the past. Ever since I sent my first paper to a refereed journal in 1989, I have received comments from many reviewers who rejected my papers. I have learned by now that many of those comments contain constructive and helpful suggestions, but I still tend to be devastated by sentences such as "the study lacks conceptual clarity and a solid basis for formulating specific recommendations regarding ..." or "there are major problems with the theoretical framework, the basic assumptions, and the overly broad research questions."

For this particular letter from the editors of the *JSLW*, I could not make myself read the reviewers' comments until 2 weeks later, and I could not reread them for the purpose of revising my paper until 2 months later. The content of the rejecting review was so shocking to me that I needed some time to gather enough courage to look at it again. The review simply said "I recommend that Manuscript #330 be rejected for the following reasons," and then presented six detailed reasons why my paper was not worth publishing. The comments made the situation look so hopeless to me at first glance that I wondered if it would be worth even revising the paper at all. This must have preoccupied my mind so much at that time that I mentioned it in my e-mail letters to some of my friends. They all encouraged me to revise the paper. I downloaded and posted their messages in front of my computer. My favorite, which I still treasure, came from Kozue Uzawa, who wrote:

Yes, I can understand that it is very discouraging to read some reviewers' harsh criticisms. However, I usually appreciate them, thinking they are trying to improve my paper. For my paper, which appeared in the *JSLW* in 1996, I revised it, revised it, and revised it so many times before it was finally accepted. And fortunately, it received the *JSLW*'s best article of the year award. So, re-

vising is part of writing, I think. Don't be discouraged, and I am looking forward to reading your article very soon.

I have noticed that many people give up revising and resubmitting their papers when they are rejected for the first time. I would have too if I had not known that many researchers actually begin writing good papers from that point. I have learned this through many friends like Kozue and other people around me. When I was a graduate student at the University of California, Los Angeles, I saw many students, and even professors, having their papers rejected by refereed journals for publication, but they did not seem to be very discouraged. They told me that it is common to have papers rejected or to be told to revise and resubmit them. They even said, "reviewers are not perfect. They can be wrong sometimes. If you cannot accept the reviewers' comments, you can send your criticisms of the reviews to the editors, or send your paper to other journals, too." The other advice I received was "If you decide to resubmit your paper, try to address the given comments as well as possible. You don't have to make your paper perfect. Just follow the reviewers' advice first." Knowing these things, combined with the encouragement of my friends, helped me return to the reviewers' comments once again. As Kozue Uzawa said, reviewers' comments are like bitter medicine I have to swallow if I want to improve the quality of my paper.

So I gathered all my courage together and started to read the reviewers' comments once again in August 1999. After having read the two reviewers' comments several times, I determined that I could probably address both of the reviewers' comments if I spent enough time on them. I decided to resubmit the paper to the *JSLW*. Following the reviewers' advice, I added to the literature review, clarified words, added more explanation, reanalyzed the data, and removed unnecessary parts from the text. Meanwhile, I had to take care of my family, teach classes, and do administrative duties as a faculty member at my university. Looking back now, however, I am surprised how much I learned through that revising experience. Just as with the revising process for the other papers I had eventually gotten published in the past, I discovered several new perspectives from which to look at my data during this time. I also read some related papers in other fields, whose existence I would not have been aware of if the reviewers had not suggested that I refer to them. In the end, the reviews were really good "medicine" for me. This would have been true even if the paper had not finally been accepted. As I had often felt before, I started to feel that this medicine had worked wonders on me, making my researcher's "spirit" healthier and stronger, regardless of whether my paper would finally be accepted. Publication of the paper was just one end product of this long journey.

The revised version was completed at the end of December 1999. Because I wanted to hear comments from experts other than the reviewers, I

asked Carol Rinnert and Alister Cumming to read the revised draft. After I revised the paper again on the basis of their comments, I resubmitted it in March 2000. Then on June 28, 2000, I received an e-mail letter from an editor of the *JSLW* again with comments, as well as two additional reviewers' comments. This time both reviewers accepted the paper with revisions. Many of these revisions were minor, but some required me to conduct additional statistical procedures on the data. Because the editor set a deadline of July 7 for my revisions, in the 10 days allowed I tried to concentrate on this work as much as I could. I was happy when I could finally resubmit the final version of the paper on the very day of the deadline.

Up to that point, it had taken me 4 full years to complete the research and write up the results. But it was finally finished. I know that I did not set any record for shortest time for completing a paper in my field, but this way, my way, is the only way that I can be happy and satisfied as a whole person. Furthermore, even at that point, I fully realized that both the research I conducted for the paper and the paper I wrote based on it were far from perfect (I actually did a follow-up confirmatory study later to improve the validity and generalizability of the research; see Sasaki, 2002), but I was happy that I was given an opportunity to make some of the results of my work public. The *JSLW* paper was published at the end of 2000 (Sasaki, 2000). I have received many e-mail comments on the paper since then. Those e-mail messages are the voices I could not have heard if I had not had my paper published in an international journal. I would be content if I could hear those voices every fourth year or so, when a paper is completed. As Laotsu recommends, I would like to stand firmly on own my feet, and walk slowly, but I hope to travel a long way, believing that the world I live in has its own value.

I do not mean to suggest that my story recounts the best way to live as a researcher, but if some readers are wondering how they can live as "periphery scholars," this might be one possibility. You as a researcher might be forced to live in a kind of peripheral world some day, when, for example, you have a family, you fall ill, or you become very busy with something else. I hope that my story will help others to realize that living on the periphery does not have to be a cause of despair, but can in fact be a source of hope.

## REFERENCES

- Anzai, Y., & Uchida, N. (1981). Kodomo wa Ikani Sakubun o Kakuka [How children produce writing]. *Japanese Journal of Educational Psychology*, 29, 323-332.
- Canagarajah, A. S. (1996). "Nondiscursive" requirements in academic publishing, material resources of periphery scholars, and the politics of knowledge production. *Written Communication*, 13, 435-472.
- Ishii, S., Okabe, R., Kume, T., & Hirai, K. (1990). *Ibunka Komunikeishon Kii Waad* [Key words for cross-cultural communication research]. Tokyo: Yuhikaku.
- Kanaya, O. (1997). *Loushi* [Laotsu]. Tokyo: Koudansha.

- Sasaki, M. (1998). *Toward an empirical model of L2 writing process*. Paper presented at the third Pacific Second Language Research Forum, Tokyo, Japan.
- Sasaki, M. (2000). Toward an empirical model of EFL writing processes: An exploratory study. *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 9, 259-291.
- Sasaki, M. (2001). An introspective account of L2 writing acquisition. In D. Belcher, & U. Connor (Eds.), *Reflections on multiliterate lives* (pp. 110-120). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Sasaki, M. (2002). Building an empirically-based model of EFL learners' writing processes. In S. Randsdell & M-L Barbier (Eds.), *New directions for research in L2 writing* (pp. 49-80). Amsterdam: Kluwer Academic.
- Sasaki, M., & Hirose, K. (1996). Explanatory variables for EFL students' expository writing. *Language Learning*, 46, 137-174.
- Sasaki, M., & Hirose, K. (1999). Development of an analytic rating scale for Japanese L1 writing. *Language Testing*, 16, 457-478.