Introduction

**WRITING: HISTORICAL SOPHISTICATION AND COMPLEXITY**

Imagine the reaction of a child bringing home a curiously-shaped stone from a country walk and finding that it’s a six million-year old fossilized snail with all manner of links to the origin of species and even to the creation of the world. Our reaction when innocently agreeing to teach reading or writing, and then discovering what we’re actually dealing with, is often similar. The case of reading is bad enough. Unworried, we begin to teach it, perhaps with success, before discovering with amazement and dismay an immense body of literature on its very nature, a finding which gives us pause. Among much else, we learn that this skill has a dark past, its origins shrouded in mystery and speculation. It was early seen as dangerous because associated with the occult and the deciphering of spells.

So too with writing. Wanting to understand the nature of this strange activity, we discover a jaw-dropping archive of scholarship on the subject. A phenomenon of extraordinary complexity emerges, for whose explanation we must turn to the luminous work of scholars like Jack Goody (1977, 1978, 1986, 1987) and Ian Watt (1957), Walter Ong (1976, 1983, 2002), Eric Havelock (1976, 1982, 1991), David R. Olsen (1994), George Steiner (1967), Steven Pinker (1994), and Steven Roger Fischer (2004). Doing so soon reveals a feature shared with reading, for Goody and Watt (1968) say that when historically a complete script appeared, it was viewed as a magical tool. Even scraps of paper were used as amulets and the runic alphabet of mediaeval Europe was certainly associated with the occult.

Traditional teachers among us might find all this exasperating. Wasn’t it enough to suffer the shocks of Saussure and his disciples – that explosion in humanities learning to rival change in the biological and genetic sciences? And must we now see even reading and writing researched, theorized and problematized, not only in first language teaching but also in second and foreign language education? Overburdened and woe-begone, we might be tempted to ignore a corpus of knowledge that will not make our teaching any easier. On the other hand, we might find it bringing alive the mundane English as a Foreign Language teaching task, with the glamour of its magisterial intellectual dimensions and underpinning.

Walter Ong (2002) begins his investigation into writing by tackling the complex distinctions between literate and oral cultures. A background that includes psychiatry allows him to track the subtle processes of mind and intellect at work during man’s epic journey towards writing. A similar background equips Steven Pinker (1994), author of *The Language Instinct*, and David Olson (1994), who significantly calls his major study in this area *The World on Paper: The Conceptual and Cognitive Implications of Writing and Reading*. Acknowledging the work of others (e.g. Gelb, *A Study of Writing*, 1963; Diringer, *The Alphabet: A Key to the History of Mankind*, 1953; Leakey
and Lewin *People of the Lake: Mankind and Its Beginnings*, 1979), Ong bluntly asks what writing is and begins a narrative that blends anthropology and prehistory, psychology and technology, philosophy and literature.

What emerges is that writing is nothing less than a technological medium that has molded and recorded modern man’s intellectual activity. Ong says it is “in the strict sense of the word, the technology which has shaped and powered the intellectual activity of modern man” (p. 82). He calls it nevertheless a parvenu invention arising in Mesopotamia only 4,500 years ago. Before that, *Homo sapiens* had roamed the earth for 50,000 years (some suggest 140,000), moving towards this supreme breakthrough only by way of pictograph and ideograph, notches on sticks, and scratches on rocks. However, Ong dismisses the idea that these intermediary efforts might constitute a kind of writing. By contrast, “true writing” does not consist in mere marks or pictures, but is an actual representation of a spoken word produced or imagined by someone. He provides further detail:

The critical and unique breakthrough into new worlds of knowledge was achieved within human consciousness not when simple semiotic marking was devised but when a coded system of visible marks was invented whereby a writer could determine the exact words that the reader would generate from the text....With writing or script in this full sense, encoded visible markings engage words fully so that the exquisitely intricate structures and references evolved in sound can be visibly recorded in their specific complexity and, because visibly recorded, can implement production of still more exquisite structures and references, far surpassing the potentials of oral utterance. Writing, in this ordinary sense, was and is the most momentous of all human technological inventions. It is not a mere appendage to speech. Because it moves speech from the oral-aural to a new sensory world, that of vision, it transforms speech and thought as well. (p. 83)

And he concludes with the firm statement: “Notches on sticks and other aides-memoire lead up to writing, but they do not restructure the human lifeworld as true writing does” (Ong, 2002, p. 83).

Ong cites Diringer and Gelb as suggesting that scripts globally emerged independently of one another – Mesopotamian cuneiform in 3,500 BC, Egyptian hieroglyphics in 3000 BC, Minoan or Mycenaean “Linear B” in 1200 BC, Indus Valley script between 3000 and 2400 BC, and Chinese script in 1500 BC. They did so after such diverse antecedents as picture writing and tokens, and all seemed to respond to a need for mercantile record keeping arising from urbanization. While the economic agency implied here would have delighted Marx, literary scholars may be dismayed to find Ong claiming (without clear proof) that “Using writing for imaginative creations, as spoken words have been used in tales or lyric, that is using writing to produce literature in the more specific sense of this term, comes quite late in the history of script” (p. 84-85). This builds on his contentious claim, in the face of modern scholarly redefinition, that oral literature cannot be classed as literature at all.

The pictograph and ideograph were only prechirographic signposts on the path to writing proper, and arose, says Ong from the need for a breathtaking plethora of symbols. If a Chinese dictionary of 1716 listed no less than 40,545 characters, the number now must be far greater. But “No Chinese or Sinologist knows them all, or ever did” (Ong, 2002, p. 86), and because this system is also elitist and time-consuming he predicts an eventual move to the Roman alphabet – a loss to literature, he admits, but more so to the Chinese typewriter with its over 40,000 characters!

Crucial to the story of writing was the creation of alphabets, which has reduced sound to space. This must be credited to Semitic people living around 1500 BC in the same area which saw the emergence of cuneiform, though it arose 2000 years later. It appears that alphabets everywhere, be they Hebraic or Ugaritic, Greek or Roman, Cy-
rillic or Arabic, derive from this source. However, since the Semitic prototype lacked vowels, the considerate Greeks, concerned about less intellectually nimble posterity, added them - with the result, says Havelock (1976, cited in Ong, 2002, p. 89), that this “crucial, more nearly total transformation of the word from sound to sight gave ancient Greek culture its intellectual ascendency over other ancient cultures.” Kerckhove (1981), cited by Ong (p. 89), explains this by saying that, more than any other writing system, “the completely phonetic alphabet favors left hemisphere activity in the brain and so, on neuropsychological grounds, fosters abstract analytic thought.”

Nor do Kerckhove and colleagues hesitate to tackle another complexity in writing which is, as Ong (2002) notes, the fact that “texts in various scripts around the world are read variously from right to left, or left to right, or top to bottom, or all these ways at once as in boustrophedon writing, but never anywhere, so far as is known, from bottom to top” (p. 98).

Seeing the alphabet as “a major bridge between oral and literate mnemonics” (p. 29), Ong proceeds to examine key differences between orality and literacy. What he calls the “condition” of words in a text differs from their condition in spoken discourse. He speaks of the full living reality of words used in conversation, their place in an activity replete with all manner of significant aspects of sound, movement, sight, even touch, all of which can be relied on for support and companionship. By contrast, written words are alone and left to their own devices – like the solitary human inscribing them. At this point, with a blend of sociology, anthropology, and religion, a key concern in the research of Goody, Ong and others comes into focus. This is the profoundly transforming effects of writing’s arrival in a preliterate society. This is why Goody in particular has researched energetically in the continent of Africa, where the shift from orality to literacy across given communities can be so vividly seen and documented.

A related concern is the effect of literacy’s arrival on the individual within essentially communal societies and its disturbing implications not just for social interaction, relationships, and identity, but also for modes of thinking and artistic creativity. Affirming basic facts about preliterate Igbo society, the Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe reminds us that “no man, however great, is greater than his people...that no man ever won judgment against his clan” (p. 287). Asserting an unhealthy individualism means finding yourself alienated to the fringes of village society, a site of difference, of solitude and suspicion, for this is where anti-social practices like witchcraft occur. Thus not only do writers pursue a solitary activity that physically separates them from the community: the reader of their work must do the same. A man cannot help his wife in the kitchen or the community in the fields when he is reading or writing. And while we rightly campaign for universal literacy, we might perhaps pause at times to consider an argument that literacy’s spread through traditional societies is a tried and tested way to destroy custom and culture.

By way of consolation, Ong reminds us that the “distancing which writing effects develops a new kind of precision in verbalization by removing it from the rich but chaotic existential context of much oral utterance” (p. 101). And while agreeing that the achievements of oral performance can be impressive, “orally managed language and thought are not noted for analytic precision” (p. 101).

Despite J. S. Mill’s strictures on the dangers of excessive analysis (it drove him towards suicide), the importance of analysis is undeniable. In any case, as Ong observes:

All language and thought are to some degree analytic: they break down the dense continuum of experience, William James’s ‘big, blooming, buzzing confusion’, into more or less separate parts, meaningful segments. But written words sharpen analysis, for the individual words are
called on to do more. To make yourself clear without gesture, without facial expression, without intonation, without a real hearer, you have to foresee circumspectly all possible meanings a statement may have for any possible reader in any possible situation, and you have to make your language work so as to come clear by itself, with no existential context. The need for this exquisite circumspection makes writing the agonizing work it commonly is. (p.101-102)

An obvious advantage of writing over orality is what Goody (1977, p. 128, cited in Ong, 2002, p. 102) terms “backward scanning.” Writers have the luxury of reflecting on what they have written, eliminating errors of style, nuancing particular statements and positions, altering not just word choice but also tempo, rhythm, sound, length, punctuation and so forth. In orality attempts at correcting errors (the terrifying finality of words once uttered) reduce rhetorical impact, heighten a sense of “imperfection” and create a potential for embarrassment in both speaker and audience. By contrast, revising and rewording written expression provides an open-ended chance to inform a text with ever more rhetorical strength and aesthetic appeal.

As modern instructors indoctrinated with the idea that writing is really another form of talking, we might take comfort from Ong’s view that, once the hard task of mastering writing is achieved, its virtues can feed back into spoken language, and especially the virtue of precision. Leaning on Havelock’s expertise on ancient Greek culture, he pinpoints Plato’s dialogues as evidence, saying that, while Plato’s thought “is couched in dialogue form, its exquisite precision is due to the effects of writing on the noetic processes, for the dialogues are in fact written texts…and move dialectically towards the analytic clarification of issues which Socrates and Plato had inherited in more ‘totalized’, non-analytic, narratized, oral form.” In Disch’s The Future of Literacy (1973), Havelock has a seminal essay explaining Plato’s objection to poets as a need in a traditional culture, where everything had been taught through verse, with its synthesizing procedures, its drawing and mixing together of one thing with another, indeed its actual identification of one thing with another – a need in this closed world of cognition and reflection for a species of verbal practice privileging not the synthetic but the analytical, the fractionizing process. Hence prose and hence its identification with science. Here, Ong mentions Havelock’s The Greek Concept of Justice: From its Shadows in Homer to its Substance in Plato (1978) and observes that “nothing of Plato’s analytic targeting on an abstract concept of justice is to be found in any known purely oral cultures. He adds that the “exquisitely analytical oral texts of disputations in mediaeval universities…were the work of minds honed by writing texts and reading and commenting on texts, orally and in writing.”

To Havelock (cited in Ong, 2002, p. 103) we owe an insight suggesting that by “separating the knower from the known, writing makes possible increasingly articulate introspection, opening the psyche as never before not only to the external objective world quite distinct from itself but also to the interior self against whom the objective world is set” And this, he continues, has profound results for religion, making possible the “great introspective religious traditions such as Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. All these have a sacred text.”

What, then, are we overworked EFL instructors charged with teaching modern youth the skill of writing to make of the astonishing complexity of what we are dealing with? How, wishing to attend fully to its component parts, can we bring to bear the stunning array of psychology, history, sociology, and technology involved? Would blissful ignorance be best, underpinned by the thought that, somehow, uncountable generations of our
predecessors now resting in the dusty graveyards of the world bravely faced the task, were innocent in crucial ways of what they were doing, and yet, as if by magic, succeeded, sometimes even spectacularly? The following chapters might provide an answer.

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REFERENCES


