



## **Learning to Write in a Second Language: Two Decades of Research**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The empirical studies reviewed in this article show that over the past two decades research on learning to write in second languages has expanded and refined conceptualizations of (a) the qualities of texts that learners produce, (b) the processes of students' composing, and, increasingly, (c) the specific sociocultural contexts in which this learning occurs. Research has tended to treat each of these dimensions separately, though they are integrally interrelated. Certain recommendations for instruction follow from this inquiry, but the conclusiveness and comprehensiveness of such recommendations are constrained by the multi-faceted nature of second-language writing and the extensive variability associated both with literacy and with languages internationally.

**KEYWORDS:** writing, second and foreign languages, learning, instruction, research, theories.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Sufficient research on writing in second languages has accumulated over the past two decades to permit assessments of what this research can collectively tell us. Many publications have recently done so, highlighting trends in theories (e.g., Cumming, 1998; Grabe, 2001; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Silva, 1990; Silva, Leki & Carson, 1997), empirical findings (e.g., Cumming, 1994; Krapels, 1990; Reichelt, 1999; Silva, 1993), implications for instruction (e.g., Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Leki, 1992; Raimes, 1991, 1998), new technologies for writing (e.g., Cummins & Sayers, 1995; Pennington, 1996; Warschauer, 1999), and assessment practices (e.g., Cumming, 1997; Hamp-Lyons, 1991; Kroll, 1998). The present article focuses specifically on learning to write in second or foreign languages. I review three dimensions of writing that have featured in published research on this topic over the past two decades. Then I consider how analyses of these three dimensions each produces an alternative view of instruction in second-language writing. In reviewing publications for this article I have selected published empirical studies that illuminate these themes. I have cited research on various second or foreign languages, though the vast majority of these publications concern writing among adults acquiring English in formal educational contexts.

## II. LEARNING TO WRITE IN A SECOND LANGUAGE

What does learning to write in a second language involve? Most relevant research has investigated one of three fundamental dimensions of second-language writing: (a) features of the texts that people produce; (b) the composing processes that people use while they write; and (c) the sociocultural contexts in which people write. Each dimension has a micro- and a macro-perspective, viewing second-language writing either from a relatively local, episodic, or individual basis or from a more global, sequential, or holistic viewpoint, as shown in Figure 1.

	<i>Micro</i>	<i>Macro</i>
<i>Text</i>	Syntax & morphology	Cohesive devices
	Lexis	Text structure
<i>Composing</i>	Searches for words & syntax	Planning
	Attention to ideas & language concurrently	Revising
<i>Context</i>	Individual development	Participate in a discourse community
	Self-image or identity	Social change

Figure 1: What does a person learn when writing in a second language?

### 1.1. Text Features

Considerable research has viewed writing improvement in terms of features of the texts that second-language learners produce. At a micro-level of discourse, diverse studies have shown second-language learners to improve the complexity and accuracy of the syntax and morphology in their written texts (Archibald, 1994; Bardovi-Harlig, 1995, 1997; Bardovi-Harlig & Bofman, 1989; Cumming & Mellow, 1996; Dickson, Boyce, Lee, Portal, Smith & Kendall, 1987; Harley & King, 1989; Ishikawa, 1995; Mellow & Cumming, 1994; Perkins, 1980; Reid, 1992; Sweedler-Brown, 1993; Weissberg, 2000). A related aspect is learners' abilities to use a greater range of vocabulary in their writing as their second-language proficiency increases (Engber, 1995; Grant & Ginther, 2000; Laufer & Nation, 1995, 1999; Reid, 1986; Sweedler-Brown, 1993; but see Cumming & Mellow, 1996). At a macro-level of text structure, people also learn to become more adept at signaling a hierarchy of related ideas at the beginning, end, or throughout a text (Connor, 1996; Kaldor, Herriman & Rochecouste, 1998; Tedick & Mathison, 1995), specifically by using cohesive, functional-semantic, or various stylistic devices in their second-language texts (Allison, 1995; Jacobs, 1982; Grant & Ginther, 2000; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Intaraprawat & Steffenson, 1995; Reid, 1992; Reynolds, 1995; Schleppegrel, 1996). Such developmental patterns have been documented in respect to discourse features unique to particular text-types, such as argumentative (Connor & Farmer, 1990; Grant & Ginther, 2000; Varghese & Abraham, 1998; Vedder, 1999;

Yeh, 1998), autobiographical (Henry, 1996), or narrative (Albrechtsen, 1997a; Bardovi-Harlig, 1995) modes of writing, or impressionistically (with rating scales) across various kinds of writing tasks (Cumming, 1989; Cumming & Riazi, 2000; Kaldor, Herriman & Rochecouste, 1998; Kern & Schultz, 1992; Tarone, Downing, Cohen, Gillette, Murie & Dailey, 1993). Similarly, in tasks where reading and writing are closely integrated (e.g., summarizing or translating), learners tend to become better able (as they develop individually, or in comparison to less skilled counterparts) to use ideas, phrases, and conventions of referencing from source documents appropriately in their written texts (Braine, 1995; Connor & Kramer, 1995; Cumming, Rebuffot & Ledwell, 1989; Deckert, 1993; Dong, 1996; Hood & Knightley, 1991; Johns, 1985; Ruiz-Funes, 1999; Sarig, 1993; Tsang, 1996).

Collectively, this inquiry suggests that as people learn to write in a second language their written texts display more sophisticated, complex syntax and morphology, a greater range and specificity of vocabulary, and improved command over conventional rhetorical forms and over ways of signaling the relations of their texts to other texts when performing tasks that involve reading and writing. The conceptual orientations guiding such inquiry are text linguistics, diverse theories of grammar (ranging from conventional descriptions to functional concepts), and principles of rhetoric or stylistics. Researchers have typically categorized specific text features—using measures such as tallies of occurrences, ratings against hierarchical maps or networks of normative text structures, or type-token ratios (of text features or types of words or other linguistic items to the total words in each text)—to compare groups of compositions judged to differ in quality or to represent different stages of learning or writing ability (i.e., in cross-sectional research designs, e.g., Cumming & Mellow, 1996; Grant & Ginther, 2000; Laufer & Nation, 1995; Tarone et al., 1993). More rarely, researchers have studied the texts of particular learners as they progress in their writing over time (i.e., in longitudinal research designs, e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 1997; Hood & Knightley, 1991; Kern & Schultz, 1992). Computer programs that tag specific text features have recently helped to facilitate such inquiry (e.g., Cumming & Mellow, 1996; Ferris, 1993; Grant & Ginther, 2000; Reid, 1986, 1992). A limitation on these conclusions, however, is that research on the development of second-language written texts has tended to use differing methods of analyses and theoretical frameworks in diverse contexts, among differing learner groups writing different types of texts. Consequently, the findings from this research point toward possible tendencies rather than firm, predictable generalizations. Moreover, evidence from text analyses is inherently restricted in its capacity to explain why people learn. To understand why and how people may change their writing behaviors, researchers have had, in addition to text analyses, to examine the processes of composing and of social interaction that influence people's textual choices.

## 11.2. Composing Processes

Investigating how second-language learners compose their written texts is a second major dimension investigated in recent research. In addition to simply describing what these composing processes are, numerous studies have made inferences about learned abilities by contrasting performance among two groups of learners who have greater and lesser proficiency, skill, or experience in second-language writing (i.e., novice-expert studies, aiming to determine what may constitute more skilled processes of second-language composing) or by contrasting the same learners writing comparable tasks in their first and second languages (i.e., within-subjects designs, aiming to determine what is unique about writing in the second language, compared to the first language). Cognitively-oriented studies have examined learners' ongoing thinking episodes or decision-making while composing, finding salient composing behaviors among skilled second-language learners to be frequent or fluent searches for appropriate words or phrases (Butler-Nalin, 1984; Chenoweth & Hayes, 2001; Cumming, 1989, 1990; Silva, 1992; Qi, 1998; Uzawa, 1996) and attention to ideas and to language forms concurrently while making decisions (Bell, 1995; Cumming, 1989, 1990; Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Vignola, 1995; Whalen & Menard, 1995). Such micro-level, heuristic decision-making about writing tends to occur in brief, sporadic episodes while composing, so it contrasts with more extended, macro-level strategies for composing that people use to prepare for, draft, revise, and complete their writing tasks. At this macro-level, as with mother-tongue composing, more skilled second-language writers tend to do more effective and extensive planning (either prior to or while composing, Akyel, 1994; Cumming, 1989; Roca de Larios, Murphy & Manchón, 1999; Sasaki, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000), revising (Hall, 1990; Manchón, Roca de Larios & Murphy, 2000; Urzua, 1987; Zamel, 1983), and/or editing (Polio, Fleck & Leder, 1998; Walters & Wolf, 1996) of their texts than do their less skilled counterparts. Like unskilled writers in their mother tongues, people who do not write well in the second language are often unable to (or unsure of how to) plan, manipulate, monitor, or revise their ideas or texts effectively (Bosher, 1998; Clachar, 1999; Cumming, 1989, 1995; Hall, 1990; Porte, 1996; Raimes, 1987; Sasaki, 2000; Victori, 1999; Uzawa, 1996; Zimmerman, 2000).

That individuals compose in their second languages in fundamentally the same way as they do in their mother tongues has been demonstrated in numerous studies and diverse contexts (Akyel & Kamisli, 1997; Albrechtsen, 1997b; Amdt, 1987; Berman, 1994; Cumming, Rebuffot & Ledwell, 1989; Edelsky, 1986; Hall, 1990; Pennington & So, 1993; Skibniewski & Skibniewska, 1986; Uzawa, 1996; Vedder, 1999, cf. Krapels, 1990). But in the second-language, learners seem to devote much attention while they write to decisions about the form of the second language or to finding resources such as appropriate words, which may constrain their attention to formulating complex ideas, their capacity to function in situations of high knowledge demands, and the extent of their planning of their writing (Fagan & Hayden, 1988; Jacobs, 1982;

Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Qi, 1998; Roca de Larios et al., 1999; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989; Whalen & Ménard, 1995). An intriguing behavior documented in various studies is that of using the resources of both first and second languages together for various strategic purposes while composing (Akyel, 1994; Clachar, 1999; Curnming, 1989, 1990; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992; Lay, 1982; Manchón et al., 2000; Qi, 1998; Smith, 1994; Uzawa, 1996; Uzawa & Cumming, 1989). An upshot of this kind of inquiry has been the argument, encapsulated in Swain's (1995) "output hypothesis", that the context of writing (particularly the time available for reflection and revision, the goal of instantiating ideas or communication into formal text, and the necessity of assessing hypotheses about the language before putting them down as text) presents an optimal context to learn to use the forms of the second language, offering practice that may prompt people to convert their acquired competence in a second language into controlled, skillful performance (Cumming, 1990; Ringbom, 1987; Swain & Lapkin, 1995; Weissberg, 2000).

In sum, the research on composing processes suggests that as people learn to write in a second language they gain greater control over their abilities to plan, revise and edit their texts, to search for appropriate words and phrases (drawing on their first and second languages as resources in the process), and to attend more often or intently to their ideas in respect to the forms of the second language. In the process of doing so, people may consolidate or refine their abilities in the second language. Because these processes are primarily mental and self-directed, researchers have relied on methods of investigation like concurrent verbal reports, stimulated recalls, personal journals, or interviews to elicit verbal data from people about their thinking while they compose or recently composed. (But computer programs that monitor writers' key strokes have started to document some of these composing and revising behaviors online, e.g., Li & Cumming, this volume; New, 1999; Pennington, 1993; Thorson, 2000.) These introspective research techniques, supported by theories of cognitive problem-solving in complex tasks (e.g., Ericsson & Simon, 1984), have been applied with many insights into the study of mother-tongue writing processes by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987), among others. But their limitations are neatly summarized in Smagorinsky (1994, i.e., learners' "reactivity" to researchers' purposes, restrictions and variability in people's capacities to report on their thinking, and distortions of natural contexts for composing). In addition to the limitations inherent in verbal reports, such inquiry has mostly: (a) required tightly-controlled, experimental conditions for writing; (b) found it challenging to explain exactly how specific composing processes lead to particular qualities of written products; and (c) involved relatively small numbers and select groups of learners (see article by Manchón, this volume). For these reasons, and in efforts to understand how learning to write in a second language naturally occurs and develops, considerable research in the past decade has sought to investigate the social contexts of composing.

### 11.3. Contexts of Writing

A third dimension investigated in recent research concerns the social contexts of second-language writing. At a micro-level, learning from this viewpoint is a process of individual development in particular social contexts. Accordingly, research has **taken** the form of case studies focused on the situations and personal challenges a person, or small, related group of people, experiences writing in the second language. Research in naturally-occurring contexts for second-language writing has produced vivid accounts of people studying at universities, colleges, or schools (Angelova & Riazantseva, 1999; Casanave, 1995; Currie, 1993; Johns, 1992; Leki, 1995; Leki & Carson, 1997; Losey, 1997; Maguire, 1997; Prior, 1998; Riazi, 1997; Spack, 1997; Zamel, 1995); in their home and community settings (Cumming & Gill, 1991; Long, 1998; Losey, 1997); or working at specific job functions (Parks, 2000; Parks & Maguire, 1999; Pogner, 1997; Thatcher, 2000), including scholars trying to publish in their second language (Casanave, 1998; J. Flowerdew, 1999, 2000; Gosden, 1996; Matsumoto, 1995). Learning to write in a second language from this perspective highlights concepts such as acculturation into particular discourse communities (cf. Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995) through processes of legitimate peripheral participation (e.g., J. Flowerdew, 2000; Parks, 2000, cf. Lave & Wenger, 1991), individual coping and learning strategies (e.g., Leki, 1995; Riazi, 1997), and the long-term, shifting formation of individual identities (e.g., Casanave, 1992; Lam, 2000; Maguire, 1997; Spack, 1997). In other words, writing in a second language forms a focus for individuals to learn ways of cooperating with and seeking assistance from diverse people and resources; to adapt to and reflect on new situations, knowledge and abilities; to negotiate relations of work and power; and to gain and modify new senses of self.

Most of these studies have adopted an ethnographic orientation and research methods, involving long-term engagement and emergent inquiry using observations, interviews, and discourse analysis. But few of these studies have—as Ramanathan and Atkinson (1999) argued—actually attempted to present a full-scale ethnography of second-language writing. Nonetheless, Edelsky (1986) and Losey (1997) do aspire to comprehensive, critically conscious accounts of biliteracy learning and education among specific Hispanic populations in the U.S., and Prior (1998) and Spack (1997) provide thorough, long-term accounts of learning to write in particular university settings. In turn, certain studies have started to depict the administrative policies, structures and practices of second-language writing, providing a macro-perspective on the social contexts of second-language writing through comparative surveys and analyses (Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995; Pennington, Costa, So, Shing, Hirose & Niedzielski, 1997; Powers & Nelson, 1995; Williams, 1995). Macro-perspectives on social contexts have featured explicitly in literacy research directed at social change, following ideas of Freire (e.g., 1970), to improve learning opportunities for specific minority groups otherwise not well served by education. Projects such as Auerbach (1992), Cumming and Gill (1991), and Moll (1989) have devised unique

educational programs to build on the cultural knowledge of disadvantaged groups, and then the researchers have documented how these programs promoted participants' long-term literacy achievement. These projects demonstrate that transforming conventional structures of education to suit minority cultural values can improve diverse people's writing and other dimensions of educational opportunity, definitions of self-worth, and societal participation. However, few such ethnographies or participatory research projects have been conducted, seemingly because of the intense, sustained research effort they require. Although they have provided profound insights into the societal dimensions of second-language literacy, these contextually-oriented studies are inherently local and limited, the evidence they present is often highly interpretive and selective (given the complexity of factors related to second-language writing in any one context), and much necessarily relies on learners' self-analysis of their own circumstances and abilities.

### III. IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTION

What do these studies of learning tell us for teaching? Most importantly, they help to conceptualize what learning to write in a second language entails. But they do so in three relatively distinctive, though necessarily interdependent, ways (as summarized in Figure 1). Instructional modeling of second-language writing probably should include not just modeling of text forms but also modeling of composing processes and of the socio-cultural purposes and functions that writing in the second language serves (Cumming, 1995).

Analyses of text features have guided many recommendations for teaching second-language writing in respect to genre form and function (e.g., Connor & Farmer, 1990; Feez, 1998; L. Flowerdew, 2000; Hammond, 1987; Hyon, 1996; Johns, 1997; Paltridge, 1997; Swales, 1990). A micro-perspective on language forms also informs conventional methods of grammatical instruction and pedagogical practices for responding to students' writing. But determining exactly how teachers' feedback on students' writing may influence their learning has proved difficult to evaluate. Teachers' feedback is so personalized, subtle, task-specific, and even inconsistent that it is difficult to document, categorize, and interpret (Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Ferris, 1995, 1997; Ferris, Pezone, Tade & Tinti, 1997; Hyland, 1998; Truscott, 1996; Warden, 2000; Zamel, 1985, and see Goldstein, 2001, for a review). Students have diverse preferences for feedback, based on their prior education, tasks, and future intentions, so they act on such feedback in diverse ways (Cumming & Riazi, 2000; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1994, 1996; Radecki & Swales, 1988; Saito, 1994). Because such feedback typically occurs after initial drafting it may have limited impact on students' online composing processes (Cumming & So, 1996; Polio, Fleck & Leder, 1998).

Many assessment practices, curricula and educational policies have taken for granted that the text features of second-language writers develop significantly and systematically as students



progress, but it is worrying that no theories and few large-scale research projects have accounted comprehensively for grammatical or rhetorical development in second-language writing, nor have explicit models appeared to explain exactly how instruction might influence such developments (Archibald, 1994; Cumming, 1997, 2001; Cumming & Riazi, 2000; Cummins & Swain, 1986; Grabe, 2001; Polio, 1997; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996; Silva, 1993; Valdés, Haro & Echevarriarza, 1992). At the same time, research on composing processes has promoted a widespread consensus that instruction should emphasize students' planning, information-gathering, revision, and editing of drafts of writing (Pennington et al., 1997; Raimes, 1991, 1998). Because many unskilled second-language writers lack or fail to implement certain composing strategies (as demonstrated in research on their composing processes), a promising area of inquiry has been to provide instruction that prompts learners to set long-term goals for themselves to improve their writing. In these circumstances, many second-language learners have been able to define, monitor, and accomplish their personal goals successfully while they compose (Cumming, 1986, 1995; Donato & McCormick, 1994; Hoffman, 1998; Sasaki, 2000).

Research that extends the focus of learning (beyond the text and individual composing) to social contexts has helped to analyze the range of classroom situations and variables that may foster learning to write in a second language. These include the spoken discourse of teaching (Cumming, 1992; Losey, 1997; Shi, 1998; Weissberg, 1994), teachers' beliefs about writing (Clachar, 2000; Li, 1996; Shi & Cumming, 1995); the dynamics of peer or group responses to writing (Berg, 1999; Carson & Nelson, 1996; Connor & Asenavage, 1994; de Guerrero & Villamil, 1994; Hedgecock & Lefkowitz, 1992; Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Mangelsdorf & Schlumberger, 1992; McGroarty & Zhu, 1997; Nelson & Carson, 1998; Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Paulus, 1999; Shi, 1998; Stanley, 1992; Tang & Tithecott, 1999; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996; Zhang, 1995), written interactions between teachers and students through dialogue journals (Nassaji & Cumming, 2000; Peyton & Staton, 1993), one-on-one tutoring (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Cumming & So, 1996), and teacher-student conferences (Goldstein & Conrad, 1990; Patthey-Chavez & Clare, 1996; Patthey-Chavez & Ferris, 1997). Although only a few of these studies have adopted a specifically Vygotskian perspective (e.g., Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; de Guerrero & Villamil, 1994; Nassaji & Cumming, 2000), their collective findings can be summarized in Vygotskian terms: These various types of situated interactions, if pitched appropriately and meaningfully at learners' zones of proximal development, can help in diverse ways to scaffold people's acquisition of text forms, composing processes, and purposeful social interactions through writing in the second language.

Obviously writing and second languages are multi-faceted phenomena. Their variability is perhaps the greatest constraint on obtaining a comprehensive view of learning them that might unequivocally inform teaching. As Hornberger (1989) and Hornberger and Skilton-Sylvester (2000) have demonstrated, biliteracy varies along several continua — personally, interpersonally, culturally, and geographically — in terms of the characteristics and development of individuals,

contexts of language use, relations of status and power, and facets of communication media. It is little wonder then that diverse cultural values inform even the measures used to assess achievement in second-language writing (Connor-Linton, 1995; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1996; Song & Caruso, 1996) and variability is inherent across different types of conventional assessment tasks for second-language writing (Koda, 1993; Reid, 1992; Way, Joiner & Seaman, 2000). In view of this complexity and variability, it is perhaps to be expected that over the past two decades of research a multi-faceted, rather than unified, perspective has emerged on learning to write in second languages.

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