



Some Steps Towards a Socio-cognitive Interpretation of Second Language Composition Processes

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ABSTRACT

There has been a tendency in research to interpret L2 composition processes in cognitive terms and to consider the social aspects of L2 writing as incommensurate with the former. In an attempt to initiate a more integrated interpretation of results, the present paper identifies three areas, within the field of process-oriented L2 composition research, where individual text production is shown to be socially mediated. These areas, which have been derived from the expertise approach to writing, include (i) the impact on writers' performance of the task environment; (ii) the situated nature of the skilled-unskilled distinction; and (iii) the role played by previous literacy experiences in the development of a number of aspects of composing. Recommendations for future research include the analysis of social and contextual factors mediating the transfer of writing skills across languages and the possibility of looking at individual writing as a dialogic phenomenon through a reconceptualisation of the notion of problem-space.

KEYWORDS: writing processes, second language writing, cognitive approaches, sociocultural approaches, writing experience, transfer, problem space, writing skill, writing task, writing context.

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In a recent review of L2 writing research, Cumming (1998) noted that, in spite of the amount of research into written texts, composing processes, assessment procedures and the social contexts in which L2 writing occurs, very few attempts had been made to link these elements together into a coherent framework. He further argued that this lack of explicit theoretical proposals might account for recent controversies surrounding L2 writing instruction since "partial explanations focused on partial aspects of L2 writing have been advocated to teachers, then countered by other partial views emphasising a different, limited aspect of second-language writing" (Cumming, 1998: 9).

One factor directly related to the paucity of attempts to integrate those elements is the complexity of composing in a second language, reflected in the wide range of positions adopted by researchers and practitioners with regard to the basic elements of writing (the writer, the writing context, the text and their relationship). This has led some authors (e.g. Johns, 1990) to suggest that no single theory of writing can be constructed with which all parties concur. Rather, it is posited, a variety of theories need to be developed to account for the diverse aspects of L2 writing (see also Cumming, 1998, this volume; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996).

At least one attempt has been made to arrange key dimensions from a number of studies into comprehensive schemes with a view to suggesting a possible integration of findings (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Still, it is one thing to say that a phenomenon is compounded of a number of dimensions and a different one to assume that these dimensions and the theoretical discourses in which they are rooted can be integrated. Incommensurability has been defined as "the impossibility of translating from the language of one specific theory or conceptual framework into the language of another rival theory or framework" (Pearce, 1987, in Dunn & Lantolf, 1998: 413). Two theoretical perspectives are considered incommensurable when their contents, observational and theoretical terms are conceptually disparate, thus making any form of comparison between them impossible. Bearing these considerations in mind, one of the central questions to elucidate in composition research is whether the theoretical discourses underlying the cognitive and the social conceptualisations of writing are translatable.

From the cognitive perspective, composing is conceived of as a problem-solving task and emphasis is placed on the complex, recursive and individual nature of the writing process, independent of cultural and historical influences. This position is based on the information-processing approach to language and communication, which sees cognitive processes as generalisable to a range of contexts (Carter, 1990), and is ultimately rooted in the conduit metaphor (Lillis & Tumer, 2001), which conceives of minds and language as containers into which writers insert meanings to be subsequently unpacked by readers. The sociocultural viewpoint, in contrast, does not understand writing as consisting of invisible processes occurring inside the writer's head, but rather as the situated activity of socio-historically constituted people who are dependent on their material and interactional circumstances (writers' knowledge is thus depicted as interacting with a particular writing context). For social constructionists writing is a social act that can only occur within a specific context and for a specific audience. The

language, the focus and the form of a text are determined for the writer by the discourse community for whom s/he is producing the text (Johns, 1990; Parks & Maguire, 1999).

The difference between cognitive and sociocultural approaches thus ultimately derives from the different conceptions of mental behaviour of a hard science and a romantic science (Dunn & Lantolf, 1998). For the former, an approach that reduces complex phenomena to basic elements, writers are autonomous objects of study made up of a set of variables. From this perspective, knowledge is understood as something stable (a collection of concepts, episodes and sensory representations) that writers carry over from one context to the next or from one task to the next. For the latter, essentially a monistic approach, writers are unified, historically-situated, cultural agents. It may be thought, therefore, that the two approaches are non-translatable because they propose substantially different conceptualisations of both writers and mental functioning.

However, the picture that emerges in the above description does not do justice to the complexity of writing. As shown by recent theoretical and empirical research in L1 writing (Carter, 1990; Flower, 1994; Kramsch, 2000; Nystrand, 1989; Pittard, 1999; Witte, 1992), the study of cognitive processes in isolation from the contexts in which they occur may turn these processes into meaningless patterns of behaviour since the writing task and the writer's response to it are framed by social relationships and purposes operating in specific writing situations. In the same vein, the analysis of genres and discourse communities, while providing useful insights into writing decisions, overlooks the actual processes whereby individual writers generate, evaluate and decide on meanings. From this perspective, on-line composing processes run the risk of disappearing in the interplay of broader social functions and individual writers are in danger of being reduced to mere passive mediators rather than being considered the real agents of the writing process (Pittard, 1999). Thus, it may be posited that cognitive and social dimensions of writing should be given equal status (Kramsch, 2000; Pittard, 1999) as both are needed to understand L2 writers and their texts.

In this paper we will try to show that L2 composing processes, which have tended to be interpreted almost exclusively from a cognitive perspective, are in fact constructed in particular social and historical circumstances. The approach we have followed has its roots in situated cognition (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989; Lave & Wegner, 1991), an epistemological paradigm that has already been used in other fields of study to seek an initial reconciliation of aspects of cognitive and sociocultural theorising (see Billet, 1996). Situated cognition aims to account for the problem-solving performance of the participants in terms of mental processes, but in doing so it closely examines the relationship between the particular settings and the nature of those processes (Pittard, 1999). It is our contention that clarifying the situated nature of some of the theoretical premises of the process approach to L2 composition as well as the socially mediated nature of many of its findings, as discussed by the authors themselves within the field, may offer a preliminary basis to find areas of complementarity between the cognitive and the social perspective so that future conceptualisations may enrich them both in a way that each

could not achieve by itself.

In the following sections, a number of theoretical and methodological assumptions underlying the cognitively-oriented approach to L2 composition will be outlined. These basically involve the consideration of the construct "L2 writing skill" from the perspective of expertise, which, in its turn, entails the use of controlled tasks to elicit performance, the comparison of skilled and unskilled writers to reveal degrees of expertise, and recourse to previous experience and training as a means of accounting for the acquisition of skill. Each of these three areas will subsequently be used as heuristics to draw out the social dimension of individual L2 text production.

I. THE NOTION OF "L2 WRITING SKILL"

Most studies within the cognitively-oriented approach have analysed the composing behaviour of L2 writers basically from conceptions of skill developed in L1 writing models (see reviews in Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Krapels, 1990), that is, from the perspective of expertise. In contrast to other approaches which have looked at superior or outstanding performance in terms of subjects' general or specific inherited characteristics or from the perspective of general acquired abilities, the expertise approach has endeavoured to analyse the performance of experts under controlled conditions with a view to identifying the components that make the performance superior (Ericsson & Smith, 1991). For that purpose, two critical requirements are posited: (i) the identification of a range of representative tasks in a given domain so as to elicit superior performance under controlled conditions; and (ii) the analysis of the mediating processes that may enable the researcher to unravel the underlying cognitive mechanisms involved in such performance. The fulfilment of these two requirements may ultimately make it possible to account not only for the way the above-mentioned mechanisms were acquired, but also for the role played by training and previous experience in their acquisition.

The first requirement, i.e. the selection of relatively controlled tasks which at the same time capture real-life expertise, poses the problem of their ecological validity, which is a difficult problem to solve. Flower and Hayes (1981) relied on time-compressed tasks as a way of fulfilling both requirements and, by doing so, laid the foundations for the type of tasks generally used in subsequent L1 and L2 process-oriented composition studies. The second requirement, i.e. the analysis of processes mediating superior performance, has usually been undertaken in the expertise approach by comparing the performance of experts and novices in the hope that differences in the mediating processes as a function of their level of expertise will be revealed. The method, as applied to composition processes in L1 and L2, has given rise to a plethora of studies which explicitly or implicitly share the following assumptions (Pozo, 1989): (i) expertise is confined to specific knowledge domains so that one is or is not an expert in relation to some specific area, as determined by the type of tasks approached: similarly, one subject can have

different degrees of expertise in different associated areas within the same domain; (ii) experts and novices essentially differ in domain knowledge and executive procedures for composing but not necessarily in basic cognitive capacities; and (iii) expertise is considered to be an effect of training, experience and practice: as pointed out above, inherited characteristics or individual differences in cognitive capacities are not considered explanatory factors within this approach.

These three assumptions of the expertise approach, as applied to L2 writing research, are the scenario where the interaction of social dimensions and cognitive aspects of L2 writing will be discussed in the next three sections.

II. L2 WRITING TASKS

According to de Beaugrande (1984), each writing task has its own presuppositions about purposes and goals. These presuppositions, which are reflected in such task parameters as the time allocated for completion, the discourse mode (*genre*), the topic, and the audience the writer is supposed to address, generally determine which writing processes are emphasised to the detriment of others, control what is considered valuable knowledge and ultimately influence what is learned. Yet their influence should not be regarded as deterministic (Doyle, 1983) since their "objective" nature must be subjectively interpreted by the learner (Luyten, Lowyck & Tuerlinckx, 2001).

Most tasks used in process research are short, usually from half an hour to two hours. Quite often it is not the research purpose itself but institutional pressure which obliges the researcher to ask participants to do the task in ordinary class hours (Henry, 1996; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992; Raimes, 1985; Thorson, 2000; Valdés, Haro & Echevarriarza, 1992) or use time frames expected to be consistent with extant examination procedures (Carson & Kuehn, 1992; Carson et al., 1990) or with the performance of similar task formats (Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001; Sasaki, 2000). One study showed an awareness of the situational nature of many writing tasks when, reflecting on the short amount of time participants had to do the task, the researcher claimed that in another setting, the samples analysed might have served as planning outlines or as students' drafts for more complete, organised essays (Henry, 1996). In other studies it was claimed that the short amount of time given for the task had made it pointless to try to analyse the full range of writers' abilities, although it was acknowledged that this might be fruitful in longer essays (Carson & Kuehn, 1992) written out of class (Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001).

In line with these assumptions, some researchers have reported that time-compressed tasks may have detrimental effects on L2 writers' behaviours by limiting the scope of their revisions to superficial changes (Uzawa, 1996) or else by giving rise to anxiety, which often leads to doubts on the part of students about whether to correct their texts or not (Porte, 1996, 1997). Other researchers have claimed that these types of tasks, especially when they are very short, although reflecting certain kinds of in-class writing, may obscure the potential differences

between some writing processes. Cohen and Brooks-Carson (2001), for example, did not confirm the advantages of translation over direct writing reported by Kobayashi and Rinnert (1992) and argued that these different findings could have been based on the larger amount of time allocated for task completion in the latter. They felt that given more time the students in their own study might have used translation more efficiently. In another case, the failure to find a specific planning stage prior to writing itself led the researcher (Smith, 1994) to doubt whether this composition process was as essential as posited in traditional composing models (Flower & Hayes, 1981). This claim, however, was later questioned by the researcher herself considering that more time would probably have given the students the opportunity to engage in extensive planning.

Underlying these claims is the conflict between two divergent temporal orientations in the time required for task completion (Dunmire, 2000): whether it is the task itself which defines the amount of time to be consumed ("process time") or whether a temporal demarcation is externally imposed on the task ("clock time"). As seen in the studies above, the tension between these two temporal constraints is one of the parameters through which the socially situated nature of L2 writing becomes apparent.

The discourse mode prompted by the task may be taken to be another factor affecting the prevalence of certain composing processes over others. Thus, research has shown that argumentative tasks trigger more decisions involving simultaneous thinking about gist and language than letter writing (Cumming, 1989) and that the linguistic demands of narration seem to be greater than those involved in description (Koda, 1993). When different modes did not lead to expected differences in writers' performance, justifications based on contextual factors have been put forward. For example, in one study where the predominantly linear or recursive composition process did not change from a letter to an article (Thorson, 2000), the author suggested a number of reasons for this otherwise surprising finding. On the one hand, the eventual audience for the letter was an actual native speaker living in the target culture, whereas the audience for the article was fictitious. This difference might have led the students to do their best when composing the letter and thus upgrade its supposedly lower linguistic, ideational and rhetorical demands. Alternatively, Thorson speculated that, as the task prompt in either mode did not limit the composition to certain genres, the students might have used a similar combination of them—argumentation, description, exposition and narration—in both assignments, thus making them more or less similar.

Many studies have made use of task topics which demand from students the expression of their personal experiences (Friedlander, 1990; Henry, 1996; Jones & Tetroe, 1987), concerns (Berrnan, 1994; Way, Joiner & Seaman, 2000), or opinions (Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001; Gaskill, 1986; Moragne e Silva, 1989; Raimes, 1987; Sasaki, 2000; Smith, 1994; Uzawa, 1996), in the belief that writing about what they know will enhance their degree of involvement. Although this expectation was confirmed in some cases (Friedlander, 1990; Gaskill, 1986), the use of familiar topics may paradoxically blur the distinction between writers according to their

degree of skill (Stotsky, 1995). A case in point may be Rairnes' (1987) study. She reported that, although her non-remedial students (supposedly more skilled ones) showed more planning statements than the remedial ones, planning for both groups seemed to be a rather formulaic process that did not allow writers to establish the necessary connections and transitions from global to intermediate goals. All students interpreted the task by converting it into a typical school writing assignment, adopting a course of action which basically consisted of telling what they knew about the topic (for similar findings, see Smith, 1994 and Uzawa, 1996). In these cases it seems that access to readily available and already organised information in one's memory may diminish the need for the heuristics and self-regulatory procedures involved in so-called skilled writing (Graham & Harris, 1997; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1986).

Although many studies did not specify the audience in their task prompts, those in which it was mentioned asked participants to think of their own peers (Uzawa & Cumming, 1989), teachers (Hall, 1990), university administrators (Whalen & Ménard, 1995) or pen friends (Thorson, 2000; Way et al., 2000) as possible readers, or else encouraged them to imagine that their composition would be published in university magazines (Arndt, 1987; Thorson, 2000), readers' opinion columns in newspapers (Sasaki, 2000), and high school bulletins (Skibniweski, 1988). Yet this concern for audience in the task prompt gave rise to great variability in the way students used it as a constraint for the generation of their texts. While on some occasions some degree of audience awareness was reported (Brooks, 1985; Hall, 1990; Way et al., 2000), on others it did not seem to have any discernible influence on the activation of the different composition processes (Arndt, 1987; Raimes, 1985, 1987; Uzawa, 1996). In these cases, the dominant purpose for students was the display of their knowledge rather than the conveyance of genuine messages, a tendency that may occasionally cut them off from the impulse of saying something self-generated (de Beaugrande, 1984). In this respect, Cumming (1990) argued that the intellectual effort involved in thinking both about the substantive content of a text and its linguistic components while composing may not be activated when writing is conceived of as mere practice of isolated language forms. It appears that this effort is more likely to occur when the writer's purpose is to convey genuine information to others. In connection with these ideas, researchers in social psychology (Andersen & Cole, 1990, in Hermans, 1996) have reported that "significant others", by functioning as a private audience, tend to trigger richer, more distinctive and more accessible associations between ideas than non-significant others or stereotypes.

The above findings relative to the way the different parameters of the task environment —time, discourse mode, topic, audience— have been dealt with in process-oriented research, may be linked to the difference between task and activity and the heterogeneity of verbal thought, as suggested in sociocultural theory (Cubero, 1999; Lantolf & Appel, 1994). It is posited there that each individual writer may have at his/her disposal different modes of thinking, that is, different modes of approaching the writing task which correspond to the different types of sociocultural activity engaged in. One of these modes of thinking —not necessarily the most complex and sophisticated— will be activated as a function of the learner's interpretation of

contextual demands. Thus, tasks can result in very different kinds of activity when performed by different learners or by the same learners at different times according to the mode of thought activated as a function of their own socio-history, their locally determined goals, their conception of the genre and the topic, their L2 proficiency and their relationship with the real or imagined audience of the text (Ellis, 2000).

III. THE SKILLED/UNSKILLED DISTINCTION

The application of the second assumption of the expertise approach —the distinction between skilled and unskilled writers— to L2 composition research has been laden with problems because it was not clear from the outset what being a skilled second language writer meant. As early as 1985 researchers were suggesting that the notion of L2 writing skill should best be understood as a composite of variables including the writer's personal characteristics, language proficiency, product quality, self-evaluation of L1 and L2 writing ability, knowledge of writing demands, thinking and process ability to handle content as a result of past literacy experiences, and writing needs (Brooks, 1985; Raimes, 1985). This conception, which might nowadays be considered as signalling a "situational" perspective on L2 writing ability, may lead us to regard the tendency in many process-oriented studies to equate writing skill with product quality as reductionistic. This tendency implicitly presupposes that a direct relationship can be established between processes and products, when, in fact, findings as to whether efficient writing strategies predict high ratings on written products and vice-versa are contradictory (cf. Pennington & So, 1993; Raimes, 1987). Moreover, a great variety of procedures have been observed in the way compositions have been evaluated. These procedures have ranged from standardized tests (Carson & Kuehn, 1992; Cumming, 1989; Sasaki, 2000), to in-house instruments (Jones & Tetroe, 1987; Raimes, 1985; Smith, 1994; Victori, 1995) or purpose-built text assessment categories (Carson & Kuehn, 1992; Cohen & Brooks-Carson, 2001; Henry, 1996), the last two with a strong institutional or local flavour which again add to the situatedness of the construct. Finally, given the multifaceted nature of L2 writing, it has been shown that the measures used to assess the quality of compositions are far from stable. They seem to vary as a function of the writing situation (Hall, 1991) or of the raters' preference for accuracy or amount of information conveyed (Henry, 1996), their cultural values and/or previous experience (Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1996; Rinnert & Kobayashi, 2001), or the purpose of the course they are teaching (Cumming, 2001). It was probably an awareness of this extensive variability of criteria across contexts for assessing writing skill that made Pennington and So (1993) suggest that it might even be possible for a writer to be considered skilled in one study and unskilled in another. This speculation, extreme though it may seem, gives a further hint at the situational nature of the skilled-unskilled dichotomy.

From an ideological perspective, the skilled/unskilled distinction has been regarded,

within the process-movement itself, as deficit-oriented and reductionistic in nature. Porte (1995) systematically pinpointed unwarranted or incomplete conclusions in previous studies on revision that allowed him to conjecture alternative situational explanations to those presented by the researchers. For example, Raines (1987), who had attributed the lack of revision of her remedial students to their lack of stylistic options, had left out the inevitable influence of the perceived teaching concerns and the immediate context on the students' behaviour. Similarly, Hall's (1990) advanced writers who revised little at the grammatical level, allegedly as a result of their high level of grammatical knowledge, knew that their compositions would not be subsequently graded, which could explain their behaviour. Porte concluded that one of the underlying assumptions of the research based on the skilled/unskilled distinction was the consideration of unskilled writers as having some kind of deficit which would only be overcome by emulating their "betters", a pernicious assumption which can only lead to a normative and essentializing stance (Raines, 1998; Zarnel, 1997). In other words, he is suggesting that the sociocultural context in which writing takes place cannot be ignored.

The discussion of the studies reported above involves the assumption that the terms "skilled" and "unskilled" should be seen as relative to the domain they are applied to or the discourse community into which the individual writers become socialised (Beaufort, 2000). The main conclusion gained from this analysis would be that writing ability is a very complex construct that entails "a host of social and cognitive dimensions that may operate differently in different contexts, a wide range of interrelated language abilities, and, perhaps multiple literacies" (Witte, Nakadate & Cherry, 1992: 41). It is thus necessary, in order to define what is meant by skill in writing, for the concept to be situated within its appropriate context. In this respect Faigley (1986) noted that the teaching of writing will not reach real disciplinary status unless it is first recognised that writing processes are contextual, local and dynamic rather than abstract, general and invariant.

IV. EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCES

The third assumption of the cognitive approach (see above) is that gains in expertise become possible through training and experience. In social terms this is the same as saying that the cognitive functioning of L2 writers is related to the cultural, institutional and historical settings in which composing processes are mediated by the tools available to writers through participation in these societal contexts (Donato, 2000). One of the most important of these contexts is the educational context, the locus where by definition the writing activities carried out between teachers and students and students with one another as interpsychological processes are supposed to be reconstructed by each individual writer as internal processes (Kramsch, 2000; Lantolf, 2000; Nassaji & Cumming, 2000). In what follows we will show how different researchers, by appealing to their learners' past pedagogical experiences, whether immediate or

remote, have attempted to account for the interaction between writing ability and L2 proficiency and for a number of aspects such as the type of planning used, the attention paid to the overall organisation of the text, the writer's personal knowledge, the lack of development of discourse skills, and certain revision patterns.

The two main educational contexts, either second language (SL) or foreign language (FL), where most process-oriented studies are situated involve different learning opportunities of the L2 and impose different sorts of demands on writers' presentation of self as conforming to social values. These differences have underlined findings on the independence or interaction of writers' extant writing ability and their command of the L2. For example, Sasaki and Hirose (1996) found that, contrary to other studies with SL participants (Brooks, 1985; Cumming, 1989; Cumming, Rebuffot & Ledwell, 1989), the writing ability of their Japanese EFL writers interacted with their L2 proficiency. The authors speculated that participants in their study might have developed both abilities "relatively evenly" (p. 157) through formal education, which may be more typical of the FL than the SL situation. It has probably been the increasing awareness of the specificity of these two contexts that has given rise to recent calls for the recognition of the unique characteristics and situation of the FL writer in a move away from excessive reliance on conceptions of writing skill solely derived from either L1 or ESL writing research (Henry, 1996; Reichelt, 1999; Sasaki, 2000; Way et al., 2000). This move again speaks to the sociocultural embeddedness of the notion of writing skill.

The writers' educational background has also been found to influence the type of planning strategies handled. Cumming (1989) reported two differentiated strategies used by expert L2 writers to control their writing: framing their compositions in advance (advanced planners) or enhancing their mental representations as the text progressed (emergent planners). Cumming claimed that the writers using the former approach had a background in technical writing, while the emergent planners' background was in literary writing. This difference in background may be indicative of how writers manage social goals. Outlining enables the writer to control the way his/her ideas are presented in public but has the drawback of prematurely narrowing down the writer's emergent conceptualisation of the topic by prematurely imposing order on thought. Rough drafting, in turn, enables writers to develop their conception of the topic but at the expense of revising it extensively to conform to textual constraints. Similarly, Smith (1994) found that, among a group of EFL Austrian writers, non-philologists treated topics from a more technical perspective than philologists, who approached them with a more social stance: each approach was found to have implications for vocabulary selection. Both Cumming's (1989) and Smith's (1994) studies suggest that this difference in strategies boils down to a personal conflict between the need for self-expression, associated with the production of literary texts, and the need to abide by external constraints, more typical of technical writing.

The influence of previous literacy experiences in the form of explicit instruction has also been noted for writers' concern with the organisation of information in texts. Sasaki and Hirose (1996) found that skilled Japanese university EFL students paid more attention to overall

organisation while planning and writing than their less skilled counterparts. The authors claimed that these differences in planning procedures might have arisen from the subjects' previous writing experiences: the more skilled writers reported having practised L2 free compositions beyond paragraph level and summarised L1 texts on a regular basis at school. Similarly, in one of the few process-oriented studies dealing with adolescents (high school Icelandic EFL learners), Berman (1994) found that students who had received instruction, either in L1 or L2, improved their textual organisation more than the controls. However, a further study (Sasaki, 2000) involving, among others, professional applied linguists in Japan, showed that the organisation skills alluded to in both Sasaki and Hirose (1996) and Berman (1994) were of a different nature to the elaborate and flexible "goal-setting" behaviour shown by the expert L2 writers in her study. One can thus infer that, leaving the age factor aside, the gains in planning after a short period of instruction do not seem to go beyond a somewhat detailed list of points to be covered in a certain order. In contrast, the flexible type of planning shown by experts seems to require "consistent practice in a variety of similar contexts to the point of proceduralisation or automaticity" (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996: 129). Again, this speaks to the socio-historical nature of the notion of writing skill.

The way L2 learners view themselves as writers, a part of their metacognitive knowledge, has also been reported as dependent on past educational experiences. Victori (1995) found that a group of Spanish university EFL students with a similar standard of L2 proficiency but classified into two levels of L2 writing ability exhibited the same motivation, the same writing experience, and the same self concept as L2 writers. The author suggested that at least two explanations could account for this similarity. On the one hand, the similar limited opportunities for writing in the L2 might have led these writers to develop similar attitudes towards writing in English, not allowing them to construct a full representation of what EFL writing ability is. Alternatively, as assessment of L2 written compositions was largely based on linguistic accuracy in their educational environment, these students, of a similar L2 proficiency level, might have been accustomed to receiving similar grades in school and thus might have developed similar self-concepts toward L2 writing. Brooks (1985), on the other hand, found a variety of attitudes toward writing in a group of ESL writers but also appealed to previous literacy experiences to account for them. Her less skilled writers, whose experience as readers and writers had been very limited, often felt insecure, frustrated and even hostile towards writing. As a result, they did not identify with their written text, or get any satisfaction from writing and were often unwilling to invest much time in it. In contrast, her most able writers, who had had extensive experience as readers and writers in their own language, obtained satisfaction from writing, tended to perceive their texts as representing themselves to others, and were thus more willing to invest time and effort to make the text fit the demands involved.

Educational differences have also been adduced to account for the lack of development in writing skill as measured through text quality. Tarone, Downing, Cohen, Gillette, Murie & Dailey (1993) found a striking lack of development in syntactic accuracy, fluency, organisation

and coherence among a group of ESL South East Asians across grade levels (8th, 10th, 12th high school grades and first year at university). A possible explanation suggested by the authors was the participants' age of entry into the school system since this variable seems to make a difference, especially if initial entry occurs at the pre-school stage, as was the case with the 8th graders. Children at this stage of schooling usually receive training in pre-reading skills, hands-on work and are read to much more than in higher grades, a factor that the authors interpreted as having some influence on finer aspects of writing ability related to connected discourse.

The description of certain attitudes towards revision have also been analysed in relation to the learning experiences associated with certain types of instruction. In a study aimed at analysing the revision behaviours of a group of EFL Spanish University students regarded as underachievers, Porte (1996, 1997) found that, as documented in other ESL studies (Gaskill, 1986), the vast majority of the changes these subjects made were at surface level and focused basically on words. Interviews with the students indicated that their behaviour was based on the activities they felt would be more conducive to getting a higher grade. Their learning experience and feedback received over the years had seemingly led them to conclude that revision for meaning was not high on the teacher's perceived priorities. Coincidentally, this type of perception was also reported by Sengupta (2000) for a group of ESL Hong-Kong high school students. Explicit instruction in revision allowed these learners to somehow adopt the viewpoint of the teacher when evaluating their compositions and, subsequently, apply this awareness to the task of getting a better examination grade in the exam-oriented secondary institution in Hong-Kong.

The main conclusion to be drawn from the studies discussed above is that skill in L2 writing—as apparent in its interaction with L2 proficiency and in the type of planning used, the attention paid to the overall organisation of the text, the writer's personal knowledge, lack of development in discourse skills, and certain revision patterns—seems to be associated with experience in particular educational contexts. It is this experience, construed by the individual mind of the writer, which will ultimately be responsible for the development of particular processes to reach certain goals at the expense of others. These studies suggest that the "ability to construct meaning for particular sign relations which is always situated in particular contexts is likely to be constrained by both previous experience in constructing meaning through sign relations of a particular type and the context in which the sign appears" (Witte, 1992: 283).

V. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The present paper is a discussion of the process-oriented approach to the study of L2 writing intended to clarify the socially-mediated nature of a number of theoretical issues and empirical findings within this field of inquiry which have usually been considered the exclusive realm of cognitivism. Collectively, a critical analysis of the writing task environment, of the comparison

between skilled and unskilled writers and of the role played by education and training in writing skill development has suggested that the interpretation of empirical findings would be incomplete if it focused only on the individual without any allowance being made for the social contexts in which the composing processes occur and are acquired by the writer. This calls into question the idea of L2 writing skill as a construct solely governed by a unique set of standards across tasks and contexts or as a kind of ability conceived solely in terms of writers' possession or lack of certain capabilities. Instead, it calls for ways to understand this construct as situated, which is a view, it should be acknowledged, that "offers both the possibilities and frustration brought on by complexity [...] (where) continuums and inquiry replace dichotomy and formula" (Schultz & Fecho, 2000: 59).

We thus need to advance toward the further harmonisation of cognitive and sociocultural theorising by developing accounts of how writers, as individuals shaped by and operating within a social and cultural environment, interpret and construct the L2 writing task (Flower, 1994). In this respect, a further area of inquiry would be to analyse in what ways the transfer of writing skills across languages is socially mediated. There are sufficient indications in the literature suggesting that the application of L1 writing abilities to the L2 context may at times be viewed as a deliberate pragmatic choice motivated by task demands (Valdés et al., 1992; Uzawa, 1996), and dependent on the quantity and quality of previous literacy experiences (Bosher, 1998; Brooks, 1985; Cumming, 1989; Cumming, et al., 1989; Carson, Carrel, Silverstein, Kroll & Kuehn, 1990) and on the writer's assumption of new cultural values (Bell, 1995). Further analysis of these and other studies might help us see the development of composing skills in a second language not merely as a technological enterprise limited to the automatic transfer of encoding skills but as a complex socially-bound process where certain pragmatic attitudes or new cultural assumptions should also be considered.

Perhaps the most theoretically promising area of inquiry would be the attempt to show that individual writing is also dialogic in nature. This endeavour would involve a re-conceptualisation of the notion of problem-space, the unit of analysis explicitly or implicitly used in most cognitive studies of L2 writing processes. So far, following Newell and Simon (1972), the problem-space has been conceived of as a set of representations or knowledge states (ranging from those related to content and lexis to those of a syntactic, discourse, or rhetorical nature) and a set of mental operations, processes or strategies (see Manchón, this volume) that can be applied to change one state or representation into another so that a final state (the attempted solution to the problem) can be reached from an initial state (the way the problem is represented by the subject in the first place). The re-conceptualisation mentioned above would involve the consideration that (i) writers acquire problem-solving representations and strategies from social interaction with peers, teachers, readers and texts but that the actual repertoire of strategies only exists in the interpretation and use that each individual writer makes of them (Flower, 1994); (ii) mental representations and strategies are part of a dialogic frame whereby each new mental representation constructed in the problem-space might be viewed not only as

a response to one's own but also to others' prior or future representations (Holquist, 1990). In fact, when solving problems in composition, writers may respond not only to their current teachers' assignments, but also to former teachers' expectations and demands, prior text types or tasks experienced, or imagined reactions of potential readers. They are seen as able "to enter various discursive roles as authors, narrators, interpreters and critics" (Kramsch, 2000: 153).

With these assumptions in mind, a possible way of looking at the problem space as the locus of the writer's internal dialogue might involve, on the one hand, the analysis of think-aloud protocols not only in terms of recurrent processes (planning, rereading, reviewing, etc.) but also as manifestations of "internalized speech of others, whether as presuppositions or repetitions" (Prior, 2001: 75). This new interpretation would show that writers' lexical, syntactic and rhetorical choices are just a reflection of the ideational, interpersonal and textual positions arising from their experience of participating in genres and discourses (Ivanic & Camps, 2001). On the other hand, the notion of context used should also be elaborated to make it more consonant with this new approach. In the analysis of the studies presented above, context was implicitly understood as the set of rhetorical demands mentally projected by the writer as a response to the expected use of the text by potential readers. The nature of that projection might be characterised in future research in terms of the different conceptual frameworks proposed by researchers working within the interactional view of writing (Chin, 1994; Nystrand, 1989; Thompson, 2001). Future research might also consider context as the temporal and spatial conditions under which the act of composing is carried out by analysing how these conditions are perceived by the writer (Witte, 1992).

We hope that these suggestions will help to deepen our knowledge of how writers handle L2 composition processes in terms of the perceptions and approaches to the task they have developed within the confines of specific social environments.

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