Teaching Writing to Second Language Learners: Insights from Theory and Research

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Writing is one of the most difficult skills that second-language (L2) learners are expected to acquire, requiring the mastery of a variety of linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural competencies. As many teachers attest, teaching L2 writing is a challenging task as well. This paper aims to summarize the main findings of L2 writing theory and research concerning the nature of the writing competencies that learners need to develop in order to be able to write effectively in L2 and how instruction can help them attain these competencies.

What L2 Learners Need to Learn

Different theoretical orientations tend to focus on different aspects of L2 writing competencies and to emphasize the importance of learning and teaching them in different ways (Cumming, 2001; Hyland, 2002). Here I review findings from three orientations—text-focused, process-focused, and sociocultural—with the aim of answering the question, what do students need to learn to become effective L2 writers? The focus in this paper is on teaching writing for academic purposes to intermediate and advanced second and foreign language learners (e.g., English for Academic Purposes, EAP).

Text-oriented research sees L2 writing development in terms of the features of the texts that L2 learners produce. According to this orientation, to be able to write in an L2 effectively, writers need to learn the orthography, morphology, lexicon, syntax, as well as the discourse and rhetorical conventions of the L2. For instance, among the competencies that L2 learners need to attain to achieve proficiency in L2 writing are the ability to produce lengthy texts that have appropriate metadiscourse features (e.g., exemplifiers, connectives, hedges) and varied and sophisticated vocabulary and syntactic structures (e.g., see Buckwalter & Lo, 2002; Grant & Ginther, 2000), to employ different patterns of overall text organization (e.g., description, narration, argument), and to incorporate others' ideas and texts in their own writing effectively (Cumming, 2001).

Process-oriented research sees learning L2 writing as the acquisition of successful writing strategies. From this perspective, learning L2 writing is seen as the acquisition of both macro strategies such as planning, drafting and revising, and micro strategies such as attending to content and form concurrently and automatic searches for words and syntax (Cumming, 2001). For example, in their review of the literature, Roca De Larios, Murphy, and Marin (2002) list five major behaviours that L2 writers need to acquire:

> The ability to manage complex mental representations, the ability to construct rhetorical and organizational goals and hold them in mind while composing, the efficient use of problem-solving procedures in order to formulate their texts, the ability to distinguish between editing and revision as two different operations distributed in different stages of the composition process, and the adoption of a flexible attitude toward the use of rhetorical devices (p. 27).

It should be noted here that knowledge of L2 linguistic and discourse aspects, the type of knowledge that text-oriented research tends to emphasize, affects these processes. Thus, knowledge of these L2 linguistic and textual aspects allows writers to use their linguistic resources more fluently and to plan, draft, and revise more effectively (Chenowith & Hayes, 2001; Cumming, 2001; Sasaki, 2000).

Finally, sociocultural research sees writing development as the learning of the genres, values, and practices of the target community. This research emphasizes the role of context and audience in learning L2 writing. According to this orientation, proficient L2 writers are those who can "act effectively in new cultural settings" (Hyland, 2002, p. 60). Such writers go through a socialization process in which they learn the values (i.e., how to see, value, and do things), expectations, knowledge, and genres (i.e., what, how, and why to write) of their target communities, whether professional or academic (Parks & Maguire, 1999; Spack, 1997). This socialization process involves also adopting a new identity and conforming to the prevailing norms of the target community (Parks & Maguire, 1999). During this process learners master such macro features as the ability to tailor both information and the interpersonal aspects of the message to recipient needs and knowledge, and micro-discursive acts such as negotiating, formulating, and mediating (Candlin, 1999, as cited in Hyland, 2002; Cumming, 2002). For instance, Parks and Maguire's (1999) Francophone nurses, who learnt to write English nursing notes appropriately, and Spack's (1997) Japanese student, Yuko, who learnt the "American way" of writing at university, all internalized the rules of their L2 communities and underwent both individual development and shifts in self-image and identity (Cumming, 2001).

Obviously, full proficiency in L2 writing entails mastery of *all* the writing competencies and aspects mentioned above. The different theories and studies discussed above draw attention to the multiple competencies that students need to attain to be able to write in a second language effectively (i.e., what to teach). Given these findings, how can we best teach writing in the L2 classroom?

The literature suggests several instructional practices that may help learners attain the competencies outlined above. Process-oriented research emphasizes the importance of explicitly teaching effective writing processes. Text-focused and sociocultural orientations highlight the value of modelling target texts, with the latter orientation advocating a broader focus on text forms as well as the contexts, audiences, purposes, and functions of texts. The three orientations emphasize the importance of encouraging learners to engage in writing frequently and of providing them with useful and appropriate feedback and support. In addition to addressing the linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural aspects of learning, L2 writing teachers need to attend to affective factors as well. This paper, as a result, discusses also several strategies for generating and maintaining student motivation in the L2 writing classroom, such as holding positive teacher attitudes and expectations and promoting learner autonomy and self-assessment.

Process Modelling

Process-oriented research suggests that we can help students become more competent L2 writers by describing and modelling for them the processes and strategies that underlie effective writing (e.g., generating ideas, planning, drafting, and revising) and providing them with feedback on their performance until they are able to apply these processes and strategies independently and flexibly in relation to their goals and task requirements (Chenoweth & Hayes, 2001; Cumming, 2002; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Hyland, 2002; Roen, 1989; Sasaki, 2000; Sengupta, 2000). As Roen (1989) has argued, "when [students] understand the processes in which effective writers engage, [they] will be better able to engage in them, recursively, on their own" (p. 199). One model that teachers can adopt to improve their students' writing and self-regulatory skills is Zimmerman and Kitsantas's (2002) four-step social-cognitive model which involves students in observing how a skill is performed, emulating or enacting the skill, using self-control to achieve automaticity in the skill, and developing self-regulation where students learn to adapt and transfer the skill to different contexts. In stage one, teachers can, for example, think aloud while responding to a writing task in front of their students or show their students videos of "coping models" (e.g., a student struggling to implement a writing strategy). In stage two, teachers can ask students to verbalize their thoughts while composing in a conference or in pairs and give them feedback on their writing processes and strategies. In stage three, teachers need to raise students'

awareness about their writing strategies and teach and model procedures to regulate these and other strategies (i.e., why and when to use them). As several studies have shown (e.g., see Devine, 1993; Kasper, 1997), extensive instruction, practice, and assistance with such self-regulation strategies as goal setting, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation (e.g., using checklists) have positive effects on students' L2 writing motivation, learning, and performance.

Text Modelling

Text-focused and sociocultural orientations highlight the value of providing explicit instruction about, exposure to, and practice of the target L2 texts. However, while the former orientation focuses mainly on text forms (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, organization), the latter advocates a broader approach that focuses on text forms as well as the contexts, audiences, purposes, and functions of these texts (e.g., see Feez, 1998; Flowerdew, 2000; Hyland, 2002, 2003; Paltridge, 2001).

As Hyland (2002) argues, such a broad approach can help students learn "strategies of engagement and response to a community's discourses" as well as "how to structure their writing experiences according to the demands and constraints of target contexts" (p. 81). This knowledge can be achieved through explicit instruction about *how* and *why* texts are written the ways they are, integration of reading and writing tasks that are related to the texts and contexts that the learners will have to deal with, and target text modelling. Text modelling involves introducing, negotiating, researching, modeling, and practicing the target text-types (e.g., reports, abstracts, proposals). The approach moves gradually from a teacher-centred mode (i.e., teacher modeling, analyzing, and discussing texts), to joint negotiation and construction of texts by the entire class, to peer discussion, to independent individual work when the learner attains the necessary knowledge and skills (Feez, 1998; Hyland, 2002). During this process, teachers can investigate the texts and contexts of students' target situations, encourage students to reflect on the writing practices of their target situations, and use group analyses of authentic texts in order to provide students with the necessary language to describe and discuss target texts. The use of authentic target texts and tasks in the L2 writing classroom can also help familiarize the students with different text types and rhetorical and linguistic conventions and strategies to realize different text stages, achieve cohesion, adopt appropriate tone, manage information flow, and achieve specific purposes (Hyland, 2002). Teachers should be careful, however, not to ignore the writing process and learners' experiences and not to give students the false impression that target text types are static and decontextualized, rather than dynamic and varied (Hyland, 2002, 2003; see also Feez, 1998; Flowerdew, 2000; Myles, 2002; Paltridge, 2001; Raimes, 1998).

It has been argued that text and process modelling are more effective when combined (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Hyland, 2002; Myles, 2002; Yeh, 1998). Yeh (1998), for instance, has demonstrated how combining explicit instruction about target text types (e.g., structures, content, functions, audience expectations, and criteria used to evaluate text) and practice (e.g., appropriate writing strategies, discussion, peer feedback, drafting) in the L2 writing classroom helps L2 learners acquire the necessary skills to write argumentative texts and empowers them by preparing them to function effectively in their target communities. As Myles (2002) argues, combining process training and text models in the L2 writing classroom connects strategic effort and outcomes and enables learners to use the new language as a tool in the process of becoming self-regulatory.

Audience Awareness

In addition to text modelling, sociocultural orientations emphasize the importance of raising students' awareness about target audience expectations. Hyland (2002), for example, maintains that "effective writing instruction involves guiding students to an awareness of their readers, and the interactional strategies, background understandings and rhetorical conventions these readers are likely to expect" (p. 83). Johns (1996) also emphasizes the importance of raising students' awareness about L2-speakers' expectations of topic organization and development so that students can produce coherent "reader-considerate" texts (p. 137; see also Reid, 1989). Beach and Liebman-Kleine (1986) add that teachers should encourage their students to think *as*, rather than *about*, readers when writing and help them develop schemata about readers and how readers read. This includes also raising students' awareness about L2 conventions concerning how to use others' ideas and texts in one's own writing and how these conventions differ across cultures (Casanave, 2004; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). To help students anticipate L2 readers' needs and expectations, teachers can discuss with their students the expectations of L2 audiences and how these expectations differ from those of readers in other languages such as those of the students. They can also ask students to research real audiences and to write to different audiences. Other strategies to help students develop audience awareness include integrating reading and writing skills and tasks in the classroom, using reader think-aloud protocols of students' texts, and encouraging students to imagine reader attributes and use those attributes in creating hypothetical rhetorical contexts and assessing their own texts accordingly (Beach & Liebman-Kleine, 1986; Cumming, 2002; Hyland, 2002; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Johns, 1996; Reid, 1989).

Feedback

In addition to modelling and raising students' awareness about L2 writing processes and conventions, teachers should provide learners with constructive feedback on their L2 writing (Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Ferris & Roberts, 2001). As Casanave (2004) cautions, however, research findings concerning feedback practices are mixed. While some studies (e.g., see Fazio, 2001) found no significant effects, others (e.g., see Ferris & Roberts, 2001) reported positive effects for correcting students' errors. In addition, while some practitioners (e.g., see Elbow, 1996; Leki, 1992) argue against correcting students' errors if we want to encourage students to write fluently and help them build confidence, others (e.g., see Myles, 2002; Ferris & Roberts, 2001) argue that feedback is necessary because students expect it and it improves accuracy. Roca De Larios, Murphy, and Marin (2002) point out that research suggests that the development of accuracy and complexity in the use of the L2 appears to not be amenable to explicit instruction and is probably more dependent on the acquisition of higher levels of L2 proficiency. Ferris and Roberts (2001), on the other hand, found significant positive effects for both explicit and implicit error correction on students' texts. Qi and Lapkin (2001) also found that "noticing," or drawing learners' attention to such areas as lexis, grammar, and discourse, has a positive impact on their L2 writing.

The mixed findings outlined above about feedback effectiveness concern mainly teacher comments on form (i.e., grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics). There is less disagreement about the value of feedback on content (e.g., ideas, coherence, use of others' texts, but see Ashwell, 2000) and on writing processes and strategies. Zimmerman and Kitsantas (2002), for example, found that social feedback on writing processes (i.e., feedback given to a learner by others about his/her writing performance) promotes both learning and motivation. This seems to suggest that we need to accustom ourselves to responding to L2 learners' writing as *readers*, rather than as language sticklers.

We also need to consider how and when to provide feedback. It is important to provide feedback on work in progress to help students understand how they can perform the writing task (Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Williams, 2003). This feedback should be neither so detailed that it overwhelms L2 writers and discourages substantive revision, nor so sketchy that it leads to surface text modifications only (Myles, 2002). Myles also warns that the effectiveness of teacher response may depend on students' levels of motivation, current L2 proficiency, cognitive style, learning experiences, and attitudes to teacher and class, as well as the clarity of the feedback itself (e.g., see Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Teachers need also to be sensitive to issues related to text ownership. Cumming (personal communication, February, 2004), for example,

emphasizes the importance of nurturing students' ownership of (and pride and identity in) their writing when helping them by ensuring that students, themselves, take the primary responsibility for what they want to say and how to organize it.

Finally, in order to enhance the effectiveness of feedback, teachers can encourage learners to discuss, analyze, and evaluate feedback, discuss why it is given, and how it is intended to affect their writing. Teachers can also reformulate a student's draft and then discuss and compare the reformulated and original drafts in the class. Another strategy to enhance the effectiveness of feedback is to use such tools as revision and editing checklists to help students develop self-correction and self-revision strategies (Ashwell, 2000; Hyland, 1998; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Myles, 2002; Qi & Lapkin, 2001). Teacher-student conferences can provide another effective tool for teachers to identify, discuss, and address students' problems, provided that students do most of the talking, only a small number of points are dealt with at a time (e.g., most serious and/or common problems), and teachers adopt "a *questioning* strategy that directs students' attention to features that need improvement" (Williams, 2003, p. 149; Cumming, 2002). As Williams argues, questioning "engages students in the processes of critical inquiry and problem solving that are essential to continued improvement in writing performance, because they are discovering things about their writing for themselves. As a result, the revisions they make are *their* revisions, not the teacher's" (p. 150).

Frequent Practice

The three theoretical orientations suggest also that we can help students learn L2 writing by providing them with opportunities, support, and encouragement to write frequently even before they master the necessary skills. Chenoweth and Hayes (2001), for instance, found that fluency in writing increased as the writer's experience with the language increased. As a result, they argue that in addition to guiding students to practice effective writing strategies, teachers need to give students many opportunities to practice L2 writing, so that processes such as lexical retrieval can become more automatic (e.g., see Myles, 2002). Integrating reading and writing and encouraging students to read and write extensively in and outside the classroom can provide opportunities for practice, help raise students' awareness about the conventions of L2 texts, and compensate for the often short time of instruction (Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998). Another strategy to support and encourage students to write frequently is to use writing workshops, where students are actively involved in researching, talking, and writing about texts (Williams, 2003).

Motivating Students

Motivating students to write frequently can be a tricky task, however. As Hyland (2002) emphasizes, teachers need to attend to both cognitive and motivational factors in the L2 writing classroom. Motivational factors include learners' beliefs about the nature and importance of writing, the differences between L1 and L2, their attitude to the L2, and about their writing competence, which in turn influence learners' engagement, effort, and learning in the L2 writing classroom (Dornyei, 2001; Victori, 1999). Teachers need to be aware of these affective factors and to help their students become more motivated. Motivation should help learners want to increase their practice time and to set new writing goals for themselves (Dornyei, 2001).

The motivation literature suggests several strategies and techniques that teachers can use to create and maintain learner motivation in the L2 writing classroom (Dornyei, 2001). First, teachers should identify and discuss learners' writing experiences, beliefs, needs, and goals with the aim of rectifying misconceptions (e.g., that writing is a gift) and enhancing positive attitudes towards writing. Second, teachers should help students see themselves as successful writers by providing them with positive experiences with writing activities; emphasizing that they can be successful in these activities through their own efforts; praising them on work well done; and helping them "start seeing themselves as writers, [rather than as students], who can get things done with written discourse" (Williams, 2003, p. 121). Williams warns, however, against "hollow praise" which "applauds students whether they succeed or fail and which, consequently, leads many students not even to try" (p. 128; cf. Hyland & Hyland, 2001). Third, teachers should ensure a pleasant and supportive atmosphere in the classroom where the students can feel safe and trusting (Dornyei, 2001). Fourth, as Ferris and Hedgcock (1998) have argued, teachers should take the different backgrounds, experiences, and expectations that students bring to the writing classroom into account when selecting teaching materials and approaches, developing reading and writing assignments, constructing assessment instruments, and providing feedback. Fifth, the reading and writing tasks and activities used should be meaningful, relevant, and varied in terms of content and genre. Finally, teachers should be explicit about the goals of the learning and assessment tasks they use, provide learners with clear goals and strategies to make writing tasks manageable, and allow students choice (Cumming, 2002; Dornyei, 2001; Ferris & Hedgcock, 1998; Hyland, 2002; Raimes, 1998; Williams, 2003).

Teacher Attitudes and Expectations

An important set of factors in the L2 writing classroom relates to teacher attitudes and expectations (Dornyei, 2001; Hyland & Hyland, 2001; Williams, 2003). Williams

(2003) cites research indicating that sound teaching methods could fail to produce significant improvement in performance if the teachers do not believe that they can make a difference in the classroom and/or view students as having little or no competence. As Proctor (1984) has argued, to be effective, teachers must:

a. Feel good about teaching and about students;
b. View class work as meaningful and important;
c. Believe that they can influence student learning;
d. Expect student progress;
e. Accept accountability and show a willingness to examine performance;
f. Plan for student learning, set goals, and identify strategies to achieve them;
g. Develop joint ventures with students to accomplish goals; and
h. Involve students in making decisions regarding goals and strategies.
(Cited in Williams, 2003, p. 127)

Furthermore, teachers should hold appropriate, high expectations and take a firm position on them in the classroom. Citing Vygotsky's notion of the *zone of proximal development*, Williams (2003) argues that "students should always be expected to perform beyond their comfort level" (p. 130). For example, teachers should insist on papers that are totally free of surface errors (e.g., spelling) because students often have time to revise repeatedly. Teachers should also insist that students rewrite their texts in response to feedback they receive from them and from their peers.

Learner Autonomy and Self Assessment

Another strategy to both motivate learners and help them become more competent L2 writers is promoting learner autonomy and self-assessment (Dornyei, 2001; Myles, 2002; Ross, Rolheiser, & Hogaboam-Gray, 1999). In first-language writing, both Foster (1996) and Huot (2002) have argued for the value of student self-assessment as a powerful tool for the development of learner motivation, autonomy, and writing ability. Huot (2002), for instance, encourages teachers to engage their students in *reflective writing* (writing about one's own writing) and *self-assessment*, which, he contends, can enhance learning, effective revising, and the ability to respond to others' feedback. By engaging students in self-assessing their own work, Huot argues, we make them aware of what it is they are trying to achieve and how well their current drafts match the linguistic and rhetorical targets they have set for themselves.

For L2 writing, Ross et al. (1999) report that students who received training in self-assessment became more accurate in their self-evaluations and performed better on narrative writing than those who did not receive such training. Myers (2001) also

shows how encouraging students to reflect on their texts and writing processes, using journal writing and guided questionnaires, helped them identify their writing strengths and weaknesses, become more conscious of their writing processes, and achieve autonomy.

Promoting learner autonomy can be achieved by gradually delegating responsibility to students (i.e., increasingly moving from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred mode), and enhancing the self-assessment skills of students (Myles, 2002). Teachers can teach students self-assessment by demonstrating to them various self-assessment and problem-solving strategies. Teachers can, for example, develop scoring guidelines with students so that students know what to look for and expect from teacher assessment of their work. Or they can encourage and help students develop and discuss (with teacher and/or peers) specific assessment criteria for each piece they write. Another strategy will be to encourage students to apply discussions of writing quality to their own texts. Teachers can also use student-teacher conferences to discuss texts of students that they identify as strong or weak (Foster, 1996; Huot, 2002). Elbow (1996) suggests another strategy, teacher "liking" of student writing, to promote student motivation, self-assessment, and learning in the writing classroom. Elbow contends that people need first to like their texts to improve them, as "only if we like what we write will we write again and again by choice—which is the only way we get better" (p. 210). As Elbow emphasizes, the role of the teacher is critical in this process, as "we learn to like our writing when we have a respected reader who likes it. Therefore, it's the mark of good teachers to like students and their writing" (p. 214).

Conclusion

Learning and teaching writing in a second language are very challenging tasks, not least because of the myriad of affective, linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural factors involved. The goal of this paper has been to review L2 writing research and theories to draw out some practical pedagogical implications about what writing to teach and how to teach it to L2 learners. Several teaching practices have been suggested. Teachers need to raise learners' awareness about successful writing processes, L2 reader expectations, and L2 linguistic and textual conventions. They need also to support learners by providing them with models, clear and specific learning goals, meaningful contexts to practice writing, carefully structured activities, clear presentation of materials, useful feedback, encouragement, and high standards. Finally, teachers need to promote learner autonomy in and outside the L2 writing classroom. It is hoped that this paper provides a set of potentially useful insights and suggestions from which teachers can select according to their actual priorities and concerns and the characteristics, needs, and

composition of their students. As Hyland (2002) has repeatedly emphasised, "fundamentally, writing is learned, rather than taught … the teacher's best methods are flexibility and support" (p. 78).

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Conference Announcements

JALT CALL. June 1-3, 2007. "CALL: Integration or Disintegration?", Waseda University, Topkyo, Japan.. Web site http://www.jaltcall.org.

Applied Linguistics Association of Australia. July 1-3, 2007. "Making a Difference: Challenges for Applied Linguistics," University of Wollongong, NSW Australia. Web site http://www.uow.edu.au/conferences/ALAA/home.html.

EUROCALL. September 5-8, 2007. "Mastering Multimedia; Teaching Through Techonology," Coleraine, Northern Ireland, United Kingdom. Web site http://www.eurocall-languages.org.

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