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Learning to Write in a Second Language

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Synonyms

Additive language; Nonnative language; Written prose; Written text and discourse (units of connected speech and writing)

Definition

Writing in a second language refers to expressing or communicating ideas in a written form in a language other than one's first (native) language. A second language is learned after a native language that is typically learned in childhood and used throughout one's lifetime as the dominant language.

Theoretical Background

Learning to write in a second language is a process foundationally and substantively distinct from learning to write in a first language. In addition to learning new global discourse (units of connected speech and writing) constructions, how ideas are arranged, and how cohesion and coherence are established, second language writers must develop sufficient language proficiency in the second language to enable them to convey their ideas in writing. Over the last half century, the broad-based objective of research on second language writing has been to develop effective pedagogical models. Many of these models have attempted to create strategies, tactics, various techniques, and curricula for teaching second language writers discourse organization skills, with a secondary focus on the quality of written text.

In the 1950s and 1960s, early studies began with the examination of rhetoric and discourse and idea structuring in various languages. In light of the fact that the study of the flow of ideas in writing represents one of the foundational philosophical endeavors in the Western literary tradition, early analyses of discourse and the linguistic properties of text largely adhered to classical Aristotelian and Greco-Roman rhetorical theory, such as the canonical elements of discourse and stylistics. These examinations established conclusively that discourse and ideational paradigms differ greatly in and across languages and cultures (e.g., Hinds 1976).

Investigations carried out in the 1960s and 1970s sought to develop new knowledge based on empirical data, with the overarching objective of providing theoretical and practical approaches to teaching second language writing and teacher education. In the 1980s and 1990s, studies of second language writing and discourse achieved a great deal of prominence and began to proliferate dramatically as an outcome of an exponential growth of immigration and the numbers of nonnative learners enrolled worldwide at various levels of education.

At present, three broad domains of applied linguistics research can be identified in the analysis of written discourse and text with immediate or theoretical goals of curricular development. In the first domain of second language writing research, numerous studies have focused on the organization of ideas and the flow of information in discourse, as well as linguistic properties of second language text, such as, for example, sentence construction or uses of lexical (vocabulary) and grammar features (e.g., Hinds 1987). Comparative investigations that undertake analyses of similar genres and types of written prose in native and nonnative writing have long been considered essential in pedagogical and curricular models for teaching and learning to write in a second language (e.g., Hinkel 2002).

In general terms, an ever-expanding body of work has shed light on a wide range of properties of discourse and text produced in a second language, as well as systematic variability in second language writing. Since the 1990s, much has been learned about the structuring of ideas in written prose and the smaller, the essential components of discourse, also called discourse moves (Swales 1990).

The second domain of research in writing in general and second language writing in particular has been closely associated with the rapid development of technology that has enabled a computerized analysis of written

and spoken text. Corpus analyses represent examinations of large – a million words or more – written and spoken collections of language, as it is used in real life. The widespread computerized analyses of first and second language corpora have radically altered how written and spoken text can be studied and how its systematic regularities (or exceptional occurrences of language) can be analyzed.

An inevitable point of dissention arises whenever multiple discourse paradigms or perspectives on discourse construction are at play. In the late 1980s and 1990s, in the third domain of studies, some researchers highlighted the connections between discourse, language, and power in society. Critical discourse analysts have emphasized the need to address the issues of power and inequality in discourse and language pedagogy, which is invariably entailed in virtually all types of schooling.

Taken together, these investigations in the language and discourse features of second language prose have identified important and significant differences in the features of writing in first and second languages in similar genres. Research on how discourse is organized and language is used in second language writing has led to a greater understanding of many issues that confound second language writing and its teaching and learning.

Important Scientific Research and Open Questions

Research in effective pedagogical models in second language writing has not even come close to the body of established knowledge about the properties of second language written discourse and text. As Leki et al. (2008, pp. 72–73) point out, "indeed, one would be hard pressed to identify foundational concepts that have aspired to provide a single, guiding basis on which to organize writing curricula comprehensively. . . . [L]ittle research and few models of L2 writing have tried to relate curriculum content directly with L2 students' writing achievements." The evolution of curricular and instructional approaches to teaching second language writing has been traditionally determined by factors that are not necessarily related to the teaching of writing as a discipline. While an enormous body of work has been published on the uses of language and ideational organization in the written prose of second language learners, as well as their social and cultural backgrounds and identities, only a handful of research undertakings have set out to examine what second language writers have to be able to do and how they need to be taught. For instance, in many cases, second language writing is not usually taught as a separate skill, but in conjunction with other types of language instruction, such as that in reading or grammar, or even instruction in school subjects, such as literature or social studies.

Generally speaking, a handful of methods for developing curricula and teaching second language writing, including academic second language writing, have emerged in the last half century. These have diverged to varying extents depending on the prevailing fashions and contemporary views on the effectiveness of a particular writing instruction, political trends in academic writing instruction, composition teaching, language learning, second language learning, and cognitive development.

In the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, much in the methods and techniques for teaching second language writing was derived from pedagogy in first language composition. In later years, second language writing instruction has striven to move away from composition studies at least to some extent. Techniques prevalent in the teaching of second language writing have sought to address an extensive array of issues that have traditionally represented major and minor foci of instruction modified to meet the needs of second language learners specifically. These techniques encompass generating ideas and producing second language text, organizing ideas in keeping with second language discourse conventions, planning and outlining, paragraph and text development, drafting, revising at the discourse and sentence levels, considerations of audience, lexical choice, precision, and vocabulary changes, dictionary uses, spelling, punctuation, editing, and error correction, as well as using computers for writing, grammar practice, and vocabulary development.

Currently, two approaches to second language curricula and pedagogy seem to be most commonly adopted. These schools of thought on second language writing pedagogy predominate in different world regions and are distinct in regard to how second language writing should be taught and what types of instruction best serves the needs of second language learners. For instance, content-based (also called theme-based) language and writing instruction is commonly found in US-based curricula, while genre-based (also called text-based) teaching of second language writing predominates in the UK, Australia, and New Zealand. It is important to note, however, that neither of the two approaches is focused specifically on second language writing, but rather each entails integrated instruction in writing together with other language skills.

Content-based instruction and curricula play an important role in the teaching of second language writing

to school-age learners and academically bound students in preparatory pre-university programs. In content-based teaching, second language reading, writing, and the attendant linguistic skills are integrated with that in a subject matter, such as, say, history or geography, with auxiliary grammar and vocabulary instruction. In content-based curricula, second language reading and writing occupy a prominent place. For example, combined with instruction in the subject matter and language uses in thematically cohesive readings, the teaching of second language writing can address issues of discourse and information flow, as well as the uses of grammar constructions and contextualized vocabulary. Critics, however contend that in many situations where second languages are taught worldwide, the implementation of content-based instruction may be simply inappropriate and impractical. For example, when instruction in subject areas, such as science or math, is carried out in a second language, teachers often find it difficult to maintain expertise in both language and the content.

In the UK and Australia, in particular, genre-based approaches have predominated among methodological directions in second language writing instruction and curricular designs. Like content-based instruction, genre-based teaching also represents an integrated approach to teaching second language writing together with reading and supplementary foci on the linguistic features of writing. The genre-based approach and teaching techniques draw on the foundations of systemic functional linguistics and genre theory. These analytical approaches have informed the teaching of second language writing mostly for academic and specialized purposes, such as, say, university assignments or technical prose from email messages to doctoral dissertations. Genre-based pedagogy seeks to equip language learners to analyze written discourse while reading and to produce school writing that adheres to the sociocultural norms of a particular academic (or professional) genre. Many experts in the teaching and learning of a second language have commented, however, that genres and their linguistic features may be subjective, culture-bound, vaguely defined, or even irrelevant to diverse types of second language learners (e.g., Widdowson 2003).

To date, research findings have established that second language writers need intensive and extensive instruction in practically all aspects of constructing discourse and reasonably fluent and accurate text. Research has also demonstrated that, in many cases, crucial factors that confound second language writing and text have to do with shortfalls of writers' language proficiencies and restricted linguistic repertoire that significantly undermine second language writers' ability to produce reasonable quality texts (Hinkel 2002). Based on the results of these studies, many researchers of second language learning in general, and second language writing in particular, have pointed out that even school-age learners or highly educated adults need years of language training to attain the levels of proficiency requisite for effective writing.

New research and the development of pedagogical theory and validated classroom practice are urgently needed. In the end, the overarching objective of empirically grounded and principled pedagogical models is to provide second language writers with the necessary skills for communicating effectively in a broad range of contexts.

Cross-References

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