

# AN INTRODUCTION TO NEW DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH IN L2 WRITING

SARAH RANDELL\* & MARIE-LAURE BARBIER\*\*

*\*Florida Atlantic University, USA, \*\*University of Lyon, France*

**Abstract.** The introduction gives an overview of the divergent research represented in the eleven chapters of this volume, including: A comparison of models of L1 and L2 writing; the parallel development of reading and writing skill; the impact of specific techniques to train L2 writing skill; note-taking and goal formation in L2 writing; metalinguistic awareness; peer interaction; and a problem-solving method for teaching L2. Psycholinguistic, linguistic, and pedagogically, based research findings in each chapter add to our theoretical understanding of the subject and provide implications generated by the research. This chapter discusses the complementarity of these research approaches, followed by a preview of the rest of the chapters, and finally presents two important questions for studying L2 writing. A critical review of new research is presented in Chapter 1. Then chapters 2, 3, 4, and 5 focus mainly on modeling the correlations between L1 writing skill components and L2 skill development and transfer. Chapters 6 through 11 discuss writers' general cognitive abilities, resources, and goals in L1 and L2. These chapters include empirical research relevant to both educational applications and theoretical advances.

**Keywords:** bilingualism, cognitive processing, education, English as a second language, foreign language writing, linguistics, psycholinguistics, research methods in psychology, second language (L2) writing, think-aloud protocols.

## 1 APPROACHES TO L2 WRITING STUDY

### *1.1 Pedagogical, linguistic and psycholinguistic as complementary approaches*

Second language (L2) writing encompasses a remarkably complex and variable set of behaviors. L2 writing research substantially benefits from the wide range of complementary approaches that have been used to study it. The majority of studies have concentrated on pedagogical issues in learning to write in L2 (e.g., Silva & Matsuda, 2001). Other prominent descriptive approaches focus on linguistic features of written texts in L2 within an educational setting (Genesee, 1994). Psycholinguis-

*S. Ransdell & M.-L. Barbier (2002). An introduction to new directions for research in L2 writing. In G. Rijlaarsdam (Series ed.) & S. Ransdell & M.-L. Barbier (Volume eds.), Studies in Writing, Volume 11: New Directions for Research in L2 Writing, 1 – 10.*

*© 2002. Kluwer Academic Publishers. Printed in the Netherlands.*

tic approaches focus more specifically on the cognitive processes involved in L2 writing activity. Together, pedagogical, linguistic, and psycholinguistic approaches give us a more complete understanding of L2 writing than any single approach can. The purpose of this book is to present new research directions in psycholinguistic, pedagogical, and linguistic accounts of L2 writing.

Case studies and other ecologically-rich methods are primary research procedures used in both pedagogical and linguistic research. Behaviors are studied in broad contexts. Social and emotional factors including motivation, goals, and social interactions are given special consideration. Accordingly, pedagogical and linguistic approaches generally take into account the variety among L2 writer/participants, *i.e.*, specific second languages, learning environments, and participants' interest and motivation to write in L2. Also, groups of L2 writers studied are comprised of participants who may be of different ages and have various educational experiences. Because the writer's interest in L2 writing is often needed to succeed in an academic context where the foreign language is a necessity, this is a primary consideration attended to in these perspectives (Leki, 2000). Researchers in the pedagogical and linguistic perspectives devote less attention to what goes on cognitively as particular learners formulate text in L2. More attention is given to devising ways to promote progress in L2 writing. These approaches are essential because they place the findings from experimental studies in psycholinguistics within a broader L2 writing context. Factors relative to both the learners, and social settings where the learning takes place, are important additions to traditional psycholinguistic accounts conducted in laboratory settings.

The psycholinguistic approach uses the experimental method. Experimental methodology is the only way to identify the causal determinants of written production in L2 with reliability. But, when evaluating such research, it is necessary to take into account the fact that experimental studies are limited in as much as they typically evaluate participating L2 writers who have the same common native language and general educational experiences and achievements. L2 writer/participants are also likely to share such personal characteristics such as age and socio-economic backgrounds. Often the chosen L2 writers represent a group assumed to be sufficiently homogeneous in order to make generalizations from large-scale experimental studies. However, within these studies, particular characteristics of individuals are sometimes deemed to be relatively unimportant. Those who evaluate L2 writers' production are routinely given only incomplete details about the individuals who participate in the research project. The study of bilingualism itself has been concerned with the same issues of identifying the type of bilingual individuals to which results can generalize (*i.e.*, de Groot & Kroll, 1997). Despite potential limits to generalization, the experimental method is essential for the disconfirmation of theories and models. The studies and findings in this volume are designed to take advantage of the strengths of the experimental method most typical of a psycholinguistic approach, but also the pedagogical and ecologically-valid characteristics of the other approaches to L2 writing that are available.

## 1.2 *Current issues in L2 writing studies*

From the 1980's, case studies and experimental studies have been complementary approaches used in L2 writing research to describe the specific skills required for L2 writing and to determine the role of background knowledge transfer from L1 to L2 writing processes. These original psycholinguistic studies were inspired essentially from writing models elaborated within L1 studies (Hayes & Flower, 1980; Levy & Ransdell, 1996; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1991) whose purpose was to identify the factors determining monolingual learners' writing performances. Two of these factors have been mainly discussed in the L2 literature: the impact of linguistic knowledge in L2 (Yau, 1991; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996) and general writing expertise (Cumming, 1989; Jones & Tetroe, 1987). In fact, the acquisition of L2 writing ability means much more than just the appropriation of new graphic codes. Written language in L2 is a specific mode of communication that requires new skills and may even lead to a fundamental reorganization of communicative competence. L2 writing requires a sufficient level of lexical, syntactic and spelling knowledge in the target language in order to express ideas in a correct linguistic form. But it also necessitates activation and specific control of writing processes, *i.e.*, planning, transcription, and reviewing during the production, in order to achieve writing goals, as in L1. The focus of research was therefore oriented on high-level processes such as planning and revising, as well as metalinguistic knowledge. Metalinguistic knowledge transcends knowledge about language as 'meaning' extending to knowledge about language as 'form' separable from its meaningfulness. In this perspective, researchers have turned attention to writing strategies according to writing purpose, expertise, and temporal signatures, and to transfer phenomenon between L1 and L2. This leads today to a better understanding of L1 and L2 learners' writing processes and difficulties.

By describing the processes involved in L2 writing settings, researchers were also interested in learning more about the activation and control of writing processes in real time. Beginning in the 1980's, keystroke-capturing software, graphic tablets, and the use of think-aloud protocols, have been used to extract temporal data and to address questions of the temporal dynamics of cognitive processing. Keystroke-capturing software, *i.e.* FauxWord (Levy & Ransdell, 1996), allow one to replay the characters typed at the point-of-utterance. Graphic tablets allow for point-of-utterance of handwriting transcriptions rather than keyboarding (*i.e.* Barbier, 1996). Think-aloud protocols involve asking the writer to generate thoughts aloud that come to mind during the primary task of writing without evaluating one's processing (Ericsson & Simon, 1993; Silva, 1993). All three of these online process methods allow one to determine the most likely cognitive processes taking place at any given instant. The methods have only recently been applied to L2 writing.

From the systematic comparison of writer's functioning in L1 and in L2, it is generally agreed upon that adult writers refer to their conceptual and discursive knowledge acquired in L1 during their production in L2 (Cumming, 1990; Victori & Lockhart, 1995). Cognitive abilities in L1 and in L2 are intrinsically tied to one another, and if writers are skilled in their native language, they should be able to use general strategies that allow them to control the impact of writing task demands.

These strategies should be particularly stable from one writing session to another (Levy & Ransdell, 1996), and should transfer to the L2 writing situation. Cummins' (1980) notion of common underlying proficiency and interdependence between languages would suggest this type of transfer. But the question remains to identify the conditions under which writers can use these strategies during their production in a foreign language, despite the limitations imposed by their relative lack of linguistic knowledge (Barbier, 1998a, 1998b; Broekkamp & van den Bergh, 1996; Whalen & Ménard, 1995).

Several studies suggest that high-level writing processes, such as attention and memory, can be activated when writing in a foreign language, even though they are probably not adequately co-ordinated with low-level writing processes, such as typing and spelling (Barbier, 1996; Jones & Tetroe, 1987). Moreover, this ability to treat high-level writing aspects would rely on a sufficient level of the writing expertise acquired beforehand in L1 (Cumming, 1989; Zamel, 1983). But the capacity to use effective writing strategies depends on one's level of linguistic knowledge in the target language, as it is suggested by studies presented in the first chapters of this volume. Many researchers have suggested that a writer's lexical and syntactic competencies in L2 constitute the principal factors that determine written performances observed (Arndt, 1987; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1992; Pennington & So, 1993; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996). Successful L2 writing is dependent on the writers' attention to and control of the linguistic as well as the pragmatic dimensions of the text to produce.

In recent years, data concerning the cognitive demands of writing processes in L2 have emerged from studies using both on-line data recording and a dual-task paradigm. The dual-task paradigm involves asking participants to carry out two nearly simultaneous tasks to determine their relative demands. Many chapters in this volume represent this type of analysis. These methods illustrate how general cognitive abilities, such as memory strategy, transfer modalities, and goal setting are involved within L2 writing processes and performances. As it is treated especially in the latter chapters of this volume, pedagogical and linguistic perspectives complement the psycholinguistic perspective. Information obtained from educational settings embedded within an experimental tradition is particularly valuable for studying how adult writers manage their writing processes according to their available cognitive resources. This type of 'cross-pollination' has been especially fruitful in the area of L1 writing acquisition. It should best inform models of L2 writing.

## 2 THE CHAPTERS OF THIS VOLUME

While there has been a resurgence of interest in the educational aspects of teaching L2 (e.g. issue 10 of the journal *Learning and Instruction*) there are relatively few published studies specifically geared to better understanding L2 writing in the psycholinguistic tradition. In the psycholinguistic tradition, researchers have focused on general cognitive processing issues directly related to L1 writing research. These studies have therefore been less likely to investigate such topics as the social context within which L2 writing is learned, and motivation and goals for acquiring a new written language. But the inherent strength of psycholinguistics research is that it

has always combined converging evidence from psychological experiments with case studies, linguistic interviews, field studies, and correlational and other structural analyses of individual differences. The goal of all of these sources of evidence is to describe, predict, and ultimately explain L2 writing: the correlations between L1 writing skill components and L2 skill development and transfer, but also L2 writers' general cognitive abilities, resources, and goals. Though all of the chapters in the volume contribute in a number of ways to the discussion of these major issues in the field of L2 writing, each has its own range of topics as well several new and unique themes. What follows is an overview of each chapter in the volume.

After this introductory chapter, Roca de Larios, Murphy, and Marin present a critical examination of L2 writing process-oriented research. The authors review a large number of psycholinguistic studies of L1 and L2 writing and highlight implications for further research directions. This chapter is intended as a critical analysis of the most relevant recent research into the cognitive processes underlying L2 composition. After a brief discussion of the most relevant methodological aspects of the research, its main theoretical foci are isolated. Each of these foci, in turn, has allowed for the derivation of a number of research areas under which the studies have been grouped. These include a comparison of skilled and unskilled L2 writers; the development of L2 writing skill; the comparison of L1 and L2 writing processes; and the relationship between general writing ability and L2 proficiency. The findings within each category are presented in a thematic fashion. And, finally, a number of limitations and suggestions for future research are discussed.

In the next chapter, Sasaki begins with a discussion of building empirical models of L2 learners' writing processes. Her research exemplifies the focus of the book in its use of converging measures of writing performance. An analysis of the written text is supplemented by measures of temporal behaviors during writing and think-aloud protocols. Sasaki focuses on the writing behaviors of L2 learners with different levels of L2 writing proficiency and the changes in learners' writing processes over time. Using multiple data sources, including their written texts, videotaped writing behaviors, and stimulated recall protocols, this study investigated the cognitive processes of Japanese L2 writing experts and novices while writing an argumentative exposition in English. Based on the results, some preliminary models are presented to represent the characteristics of the participants' writing processes according to their writing expertise. Sasaki insists on the necessity for this kind of study to be complemented by qualitative studies that examine the details of L2 writers' individual writing processes. Such detailed qualitative studies would be useful for filling in gaps in L2 writing activity models.

Next, Durgunoglu, Mir, and Arino-Marti discuss the joint development of reading and writing in L2. Again, a wide variety of measures are collected including those mentioned in Sasaki's chapter as well as word recognition proficiency, knowledge of syntax, spelling, phonology, and vocabulary and oral proficiency. Durgunoglu *et al.* discuss the relationship between progress in writing activities and the development of linguistic competencies in L2. A cognitive analysis of the writing of fourth-grade Spanish-English bilingual children lead the authors to discuss the links between language, reading and writing variables in the two languages. Eight tests were given at the beginning of the school year to evaluate, in each language, word

New Directions for Research in L2 Writing

Ransdell, S.; Barbier, M.-L. (Eds.)

2002, X, 277 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-0538-1