Abstract

Academic writing requires conscious effort and much practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas. Students writing in a second language are also faced with social and cognitive challenges related to second language acquisition. L1 models of writing instruction and research on composing processes have been the theoretical basis for using the process approach in L2 writing pedagogy. However, language proficiency and competence underlies the ability to write in L2 in a fundamental way. Therefore, L2 writing instructors should take into account both strategy development and language skill development when working with students. This paper explores error in writing in relation to particular aspects of second language acquisition and theories of the writing process in L1 and L2. It can be argued that a focus on the writing process as a pedagogical tool is only appropriate for second language learners if attention is given to linguistic development.
and effective feedback with regard to their errors in writing.

Introduction

The ability to write well is not a naturally acquired skill; it is usually learned or culturally transmitted as a set of practices in formal instructional settings or other environments. Writing skills must be practiced and learned through experience. Writing also involves composing, which implies the ability either to tell or retell pieces of information in the form of narratives or description, or to transform information into new texts, as in expository or argumentative writing. Perhaps it is best viewed as a continuum of activities that range from the more mechanical or formal aspects of “writing down” on the one end, to the more complex act of composing (Omaggio Hadley, 1993). It is undoubtedly the act of composing, though, which can create problems for students, especially for those writing in a second language (L2) in academic contexts. Formulating new ideas can be difficult because it involves transforming or reworking information, which is much more complex than writing as telling. By putting together concepts and solving problems, the writer engages in “a two-way interaction between continuously developing knowledge and context” (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987, p. 12). Indeed, academic writing requires conscious effort and practice in composing, developing, and analyzing ideas.

Compared to students writing in their native language (L1), however, students writing in their L2 have to also acquire proficiency in the use of the language as well as writing strategies, techniques and skills. They might also have to deal with instructors and faculty members who may or may not get beyond their language problems when evaluating their work. Although a certain amount of consciousness-raising on the part of the readers may be warranted, students want to write close to error-free texts and they enter language courses with the expectations of becoming more proficient writers in the L2.

This paper explores error in writing in relation to particular aspects of second language acquisition and theories of the writing process in L1 and L2. I argue that the process approach to instruction, with its emphasis on the writing process, meaning making, invention and multiple drafts (Raimes, 1991), is only appropriate for second language learners if they are both able to get sufficient feedback with regard to their errors in writing, and are proficient enough in the language to implement revision strategies.

A brief survey of the nature of L2 writing and L1 models of the writing process illustrates why it is difficult to apply L1 research to a model for second language writing. Further, certain social and cognitive factors related to second language learners involved in the language learning process also affect L2 writing. With a discussion of these factors, fundamental questions about error in writing and L2 proficiency are raised. It should then become apparent that the process approach to writing instruction can only be effective if these two components are taken into consideration.

Models of L1 and L2 Writing

Most ESL students studying in post-secondary institutions have writing skills. However, their purposes for writing are sometimes not the kind valued by Western academic communities. The nature of academic literacy often confuses and disorients students, “particularly those who bring with them a set of conventions that are at odds with those of the academic world” (Kutz, Groden & Zamel, 1993, p. 30). In addition, the culture-specific nature of schemata—abstract mental structures representing our knowledge of things, events, and situations—can lead to difficulties when students write texts in L2. Knowing how to write a
does not necessarily mean that students will be able to do these things in English (Kern, 2000). As a result, any appropriate instruction must take into consideration the influence from various educational, social, and cultural experiences that students have in their native language. These include textual issues, such as rhetorical and cultural preferences for organizing information and structuring arguments, commonly referred to as contrastive rhetoric (Cai, 1999; Connor, 1997; Kaplan, 1987; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 1996; Leki, 1993; 1997; Matalene, 1985), knowledge of appropriate genres (Johns, 1995; Swales, 1990), familiarity with writing topics, instructional socialization (Coleman, 1996; Holliday, 1997; Valdes, 1995). In addition to instructional and cultural factors, L2 writers have varying commands of the target language, which affect the way structural errors are treated.

Much of the research on L2 writing has been closely dependent on L1 research. Although linguistically different in many ways from L1 writing (Silva, 1993), L1 models have had a significant influence on L2 writing instruction and the development of a theory of L2 writing. However, a look at two popular L1 models will give us some insight into the problem of developing a distinct construct of L2 writing. [-2-]

The Flower and Hayes (1980, 1981) model focuses on what writers do when they compose. It examines the rhetorical problem in order to determine the potential difficulties a writer could experience during the composing process. The problem-solving activity is divided into two major components: the rhetorical situation (audience, topic, assignment), and the writer's own goals (involving the reader, the writer's persona, the construction of meaning, and the production of the formal text). By comparing skilled and less-skilled writers, the emphasis here is placed on “students’ strategic knowledge and the ability of students to transform information purposes” (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996, p. 116). However, the social dimension is important too. Indeed, writing “should not be viewed solely as an individually-oriented, inner-directed cognitive process, but as much as an acquired response to the discourse conventions particular communities” (Swales, 1990, p. 4).

In more recent studies that examine the goals students set for themselves, the strategies they use to develop their organizing of ideas and the metacognitive awareness they bring to both these acts, Flower and her colleagues (1990) analyze the academic task of reading-to-write to establish the interaction of context and cognition in performing a particular writing task. One of the problems they note is the transition students are required to make when entering the academic discourse community (a peculiar, socially constructed convention in itself), where students need to learn how to operate successfully in an academic conversation that implies knowledge of the textual conventions, expectations, and formulaic expressions particular to the discourse. According to the researchers, “conceptualizing this transition as a social/cognitive act of entering a discourse emphasizes both the problem-solving effort of a student learning to negotiate a new situation and the role the situation will play in what is learned” (p. 222). The view that writing is typically a socially situated, communicative act is later incorporated into Flower’s (1994) socio-cognitive theory of writing. In the social cognitive curriculum students are taught as apprentices in negotiating an academic community, and in the process develop strategic knowledge. Writing skills are acquired and used through negotiated interaction with real audience expectations, such as in peer group responses. Instruction should, then, afford students the opportunity to participate in transactions with their own texts and the texts of others (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). By guiding students toward a conscious awareness of how an audience will interpret their work, learners then learn to write with a “readerly” sensitivity (Kern, 2000).

Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) also propose a model that suggests reasons for differences in writing ability between skilled and less-
skilled writers. The basic difference is revealed in their two models of writing: the knowledge-telling model, whose basic structure depends on the processes of retrieving content from memory with regard to topical and genre cues, and the knowledge-transforming model, which involves more reflective problem-solving analysis and goal-setting. The latter model is important because it opens up the idea of multiple processing, which is revealed through writing tasks that vary in processing complexity. The authors discuss the notion of mental representation as a writing strategy. From their research with graduate students, they observe that the students “generated goals for their compositions and engaged in problem solving involving structure and gist as well as verbatim representations” (p. 354). The knowledge-transforming or intentional writing model is different from knowledge telling in that it involves setting goals that are to be achieved through the composing process, and the purposeful achievement of those goals. The composing process does not depend on memories and emotions and on external (teacher) assistance for its direction. In fact, Bereiter and Scardamalia encourage the more passive kind of cognition by “continually telling students what to do . . . and assume responsibility for what becomes of their minds” (p. 361). They also argue that the ability to wrestle with and resolve both content and rhetorical problems calls upon a dialectical process for reflection. If students rarely practice the kinds of writing tasks that develop knowledge-transforming skills, they are not likely to be able to perform those skills easily.

Both the Flower and Hayes, and the Bereiter and Scardamalia writing process models have served as the theoretical basis for using the process approach in both L1 and L2 writing instruction. By incorporating pre-writing activities such as collaborative brainstorming, choice of personally meaningful topics, strategy instruction in the stages of composing, drafting, revising, and editing, multiple drafts and peer-group editing, the instruction takes into consideration what writers do as they write. Attention to the writing process stresses more of a workshop approach to instruction, which fosters classroom interaction, and engages students in analyzing and commenting on a variety of texts. The L1 theories also seem to support less teacher intervention and less attention to form.

Despite their implications for classroom instruction, not all the components of these models are appropriate in an L2 context. The model, in particular, does not recognize cross-cultural differences and issues related to sociocultural variation in the functions of the written language (Kern, 2000). Additionally, with native speakers, “writing ability is more closely linked to fluency in and familiarity with the conventions of expository discourse” (Kogen 1986, p. 25). L2 writers, however, are in the process of acquiring these conventions and so they often need more instruction about the language itself. Limited knowledge of vocabulary, language structure, and content can inhibit a L2 writer’s performance. In addition, the models do not account for growing language proficiency, which is a vital element of L2 writing development.

Similarly, composing, especially in the revision stage, challenges L2 writers. In his research on how L2 writers revise their work, Silva (1993) observes that learners revise at a superficial level. They re-read and reflect less on their written text, revise less, and when they do, the revision is primarily focused on grammatical correction. On the other hand, L1 writing ability may also transfer to L2. As a result, students who are skilled writers in their native languages and have surpassed a certain L2 proficiency level can adequately transfer those skills. Of course, those who have difficulty writing in their native language may not have a repertoire of strategies to help them in their L2 writing development (Sasaki & Hirose, 1996). These observations warrant consideration for L2 instruction and course design, especially for those courses in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) writing that include less-skilled writers or those who have never had the opportunity to engage in more knowledge-transforming tasks in their native languages.
In sum, social-cognitive theories of writing show us how social contexts for writing operate together with the cognitive efforts of the writer, just as they do when a person is acquiring a new language. However, the problem with applying L1 theories and subsequent models of instruction (such as the process approach) to L2 instruction is that L2 writing also involves the cognitively demanding task of generating meaningful text in a second language. As a result, L2 students generally want more teacher involvement and guidance, especially at the revision stage. Consequently, in order to provide effective pedagogy, L2 writing instructors need to understand the social and cognitive factors involved in the process of second language acquisition and error in writing because these factors have a salient effect on L2 writing development.

The Sources of Error in L2 Writing: Social and Cognitive Factors

Social Factors

Both social and cognitive factors affect language learning. Exploration of social factors gives us some idea of why learners differ in rate of L2 learning, in proficiency type (for instance, conversational ability versus writing ability), and in ultimate proficiency (Ellis, 1994). Research based on direct (self-report questionnaires) and indirect measures generally shows that learners with positive attitudes, motivation, and concrete goals will have these attitudes reinforced if they experience success. Likewise, learners' negative attitudes may be strengthened by lack of success or by failure (McGroarty, 1996). Needless to say, although ESL learners may have negative attitudes toward writing for academic purposes, many of them are financially and professionally committed to graduating from English-speaking universities, and as a result, have strong reasons for learning and improving their skills.

There is a direct relationship between learner attitudes and learner motivation. Gardner’s socio-educational model is designed to account for the role of social factors in language acquisition. It interrelates four aspects of L2 learning: the social and cultural milieu (which determines beliefs about language and culture), individual learner differences (related to motivation and language aptitude), the setting (formal and/or informal learning contexts), and learning outcomes. Integrative motivation involves a desire to learn an L2 because individuals need to learn the target language to integrate into the community. In addition, the people or the culture represented by the other language group may also inspire them. On the other hand, instrumental motivation acknowledges the role that external influences and incentives play in strengthening the learners’ desire to achieve. Learners who are instrumentally motivated are interested in learning the language for a particular purpose, such as writing a dissertation or getting a job.

Despite problems in Gardner’s research design, it can be concluded that motivational factors “probably do not make much difference on their own, but they can create a more positive context in which language learning is likely to flourish” (Bialystok & Hakuta, 1994, p. 140). (See Lambert, 1975; Schumann, 1978; Giles, Robinson & Smith, 1980; Giles & Byrne, 1982; and Hamers & Blanc, 1982 for examples of other models that focus on the social circumstances of learning in relation to second language acquisition.)

Learners’ attitudes, motivations, and goals can explain why some L2 writers perform better than others. For example, at the beginning of each of my ESL writing classes, I often ask students to fill out a personal information form to determine their needs and interests when planning my course. The answers to questions such as, “Do you enjoy writing in English?” and “What are your strengths and weaknesses in writing?” are revealing. Most students will answer that they hate writing in English (and in their native language, for that matter), and as
only taking the course for educational and/or career purposes. In fact, it seems that many of the students would prefer to be practicing conversation. Students may enjoy writing e-mail messages to friends around the world, but challenges, such as difficulties getting started, finding the right words, and developing topics, abound. However, if students show an overall interest in the target language (integrative motivation), perceive that there is parental and social support, and have a desire to achieve their professional goals (instrumental motivation), they can become more proficient in their ability to write in English, despite the initial lack of self-motivation.

Writing teachers should be aware of how the instrumental motivation of their L2 students will influence the effectiveness of their lessons. Common purposes for learners writing in an EAP context include writing a research paper for publication in an English-speaking journal or writing a business report for a multinational company. These learners may be less motivated to write stories or poetry, because they perceive that these tasks are not related to their needs. Even writing a standard research essay will need to write project reports and memos. If learners perceive writing tasks to be useless in a manner. Consequently, it is likely that they will be inattentive to errors, monitoring, and rhetorical concerns (Carson, 2001). However, if students are highly motivated, then any sort of writing task, expressive or otherwise, are welcomed.

Social factors also influence the quality of contact that learners will experience. Indeed, we cannot assume that "more contact" with the target language will result in more acquisition of the L2. Certainly, instructors recommend that learners studying English for academic purposes should read academic texts, attend academic lectures, and even work with students who are native speakers in order to become more acquainted with the discourse. However, if they do not engage in the texts, understand the talks, or actively contribute to the study sessions, these activities will have little effect on student progress. Interaction is key. A common complaint among ESL students at university is that they have difficulty meeting native speakers and getting to know them. Students often have as much interaction with native speakers as they had expected. In addition, they often associate with other students from their L1 and speak their native language. Unfortunately, this pattern can slow down L2 development in all skill areas. The instructor is often responsible for providing incentives or opportunities for interactions with native speakers. Generally speaking, if L2 learners are motivated to integrate into the L2, they will develop a higher level of proficiency and positive attitudes, which can have a positive effect on their writing.

In short, learners may continue to exhibit errors in their writing for the following social reasons:

1. negative attitudes toward the target language
2. continued lack of progress in the L2
3. a wide social and psychological distance between them and the target culture, and,
4. a lack of integrative and instrumental motivation for learning.

Cognitive Factors

Academic writing is believed to be cognitively complex. Acquisition of academic vocabulary and discourse style is particularly difficult. According to cognitive theory, communicating orally or in writing is an active process of skill development and gradual elimination of errors as the learner internalizes the language. Indeed, acquisition is a product of the complex interaction of the linguistic environment and the learner's internal mechanisms. With practice, there is continual restructuring as learners shift these internal representations in order to achieve increasing degrees of mastery in L2 (McLaughlin, 1988). [-6-]
One model that applies to both speaking and writing in a second language is Anderson’s (1985) model of language production, which can be divided into three stages: construction, in which the writer plans what he/she is going to write by brainstorming, using a mind-map or outline; transformation, in which language rules are applied to transform intended meanings into the form of the message when the writer is composing or revising; and execution, which corresponds to the physical process of producing the text. The first two stages have been described as “setting goals and searching memory for information, then using production systems to generate language in phrases or constituents” (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990, p. 42). Writers vacillate between these processes to express in writing. Anderson’s learning theory supports teaching approaches that combine the development of language and content knowledge, practice in using this knowledge, and strategy training to encourage independent learning (Snow, 2001).

In structuring information, the writer uses various types of knowledge, including discourse and sociolinguistic rules (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). Organization at both the sentence and the text level is also important for effective communication of meaning, and ultimately, for the quality of the written product (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1987). For instance, coherence problems may be due to not knowing how to organize text or how to store the relevant information converting information into meaningful sentences. At this point, the writer translates or changes his/her plans into a mental representation of the goals, ideas, and organization developed in the construction stage. Revision is also part of this stage: revision is a cognitively demanding task for L2 learners because it not only involves task definition, evaluation, strategy selection, and modification of text in the writing plan (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996), but also the ability of students to analyze and evaluate the feedback they receive on their writing.

Due to the complex process of writing in a second language, learners often find it difficult to develop all aspects of the stages simultaneously. As a result, they selectively use only those aspects that are automatic or have already been proceduralized (O’Malley & Chamot, 1990). In order to enhance or facilitate language production, students can develop strategies that isolate component mental processes. O’Malley and Chamot have differentiated strategies into three categories: metacognitive, such as planning the organization of written discourse or monitoring (that is, being aware of what one is doing and responding appropriately to the demands of a task); cognitive, such as transferring or using known linguistic information to facilitate a new learning task or using imagery for recalling and using new vocabulary, and social/affective strategies, which involve cooperating with peers, for example, in peer revision classes. Learner strategies can be effective, but they need to be internalized so that they can be utilized in adverse learning situations. For example, if an environment is perceived to be stressful or threatening, for example, writing as part of a job interview process, or performing under timed test conditions, learners’ affective states can influence cognition. Emotional influences along with cognitive factors can account for achievement and performance in L2, to a certain extent. Schumann (1998) argues that affect may influence cognition through its role in framing a problem and in adopting processing strategies. He states that we very often use feelings as information: “When faced with a situation about which we have to make a judgment we often ask ourselves how we feel about it . . . we may also employ feelings when time constraints and competing tasks limit our cognitive capacities” (p. 247). This outcome may also affect how well students perform when they are under stress.

Language transfer is another important cognitive factor related to writing error. Transfer involves the study of similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been acquired by the speaker. The study of transfer involves the identification of errors (negative transfer), facilitation (positive transfer), and avoidance of target language forms, and the study of the strategies that writers use to correct these errors.
over-use (Ellis, 1994). Behaviorist accounts claim that transfer is the cause of errors, whereas from a cognitive perspective, transfer is seen as a resource that the learner actively draws upon in interlanguage development (Selinker, 1972). In other words, “the L1 can have a direct effect on interlanguage development by influencing the hypotheses that learners construct” (Ellis, 1994, p. 342). According to McLaughlin, transfer errors can occur because:

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\text{[L]earners lack the necessary information in the second language or the attentional capacity to activate the appropriate second-language routine. But such an account says little about why certain linguistic forms transfer and others do not. (1988, p. 50)}
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Despite the fact that L1 transfer is no longer viewed as the only predictor or cause of error at the structural level (since it is difficult to distinguish empirically between instances of communication and language transfer in research studies), a writer’s first language plays a complex and significant role in L2 acquisition. For example, when learners write under pressure, they may call upon systematic resources from their native language for the achievement and synthesis of meaning (Widdowson, 1990). Research has also shown that language learners sometimes use their native language when generating ideas and attending to details (Friedlander, 1990). In addition, contrastive studies, which have focused on characteristics of L1 languages and cultures, have helped us understand L2 writing development. However, many reductive, essentializing generalizations about ways of writing and cultural stereotypes about students from certain linguistic backgrounds have occurred regardless of social factors, such as “the contexts, and purpose of their learning to write, education, and prior experience” (Raimes, 1998, p. 143). In addition, learners are influenced by many global phenomena and are themselves continually changing with new experiences. In spite of these criticisms, though, an understanding of “difference among epistemological rhetorical, and pedagogical traditions” (Kern, 2000, p. 176) and the impact of language transfer can be illuminating for an understanding of why learners make certain structural and organizational errors.

Input and interaction also play important roles in the writing process, especially in classroom settings. Some studies have indicated that input, along with L1 transfer and communicative need may work together to shape interlanguage (Ellis, 1994; Selinker, 1972). Research has focused on four broad areas: input frequency, the nature of comprehensible input, learner output in interaction, and the processes of collaborative discourse construction. Writers need to receive adequate L2 input in order to form new hypotheses about syntactic and rhetorical forms in the target language. If students are not exposed to native-like models of written texts, their errors in writing are more likely to persist. Errors abound in peer review classes or in computer-mediated exchanges where learners read and respond to each other’s compositions. Indeed, in many of my own classes, interlanguage talk or discourse is often the primary source of input for many learners. However, if the interaction, oral or written, allows for adequate negotiation of meaning, peer responses can be very useful. (See Pellettieri (2000) for what happens when learners respond to each other on the computer and read texts containing spelling and grammar errors).

We can see that writing in a second language is a complex process involving the ability to communicate in L2 (learner output) and the ability to construct a text in order to express one’s ideas effectively in writing. Social and cognitive factors and learner strategies help us in assessing the underlying reasons why L2 learners exhibit particular writing errors. For instance, Spanish speakers living in the United States may be due to a multiplicity of factors, including the effects of transfer and interference from the Spanish language, and cultural norms (Plata, 1995). Spanish-speaking writers must undergo the task of cognitively exchanging the style of the Spanish language for that of English. For this transformation to happen, some students
replacing their birth name with an English one, can help them to become more immersed in the target language and culture. In short, because learners are less familiar and less confident with structural elements of a new language, rhetorical and cultural conventions and even new uses of writing, writing in an L2 can have errors and be less effective than writing in L1 (Kern, 2000).

The Sources of Error in L2 Writing

There are several ways to think about error in writing in light of what we know about second language acquisition and how texts, context and the writing process interact with one another. As mentioned, students writing in a second language generally produce texts that contain varying degrees of grammatical and rhetorical errors. In fact, depending on proficiency level, the more content-rich and creative the text, the greater the possibility there is for errors at the morphosyntactic level. These kinds of errors are especially common among L2 writers who have a lot of ideas, but not enough language to express what they want to say in a comprehensible way.

What we classify as an error, which is associated with learner competence, may actually be a mistake, or more specifically in an EAP context, a “derailment” related to learner performance (Shaughnessy, 1977). These “derailments” occur when students attempt to use the academic voice and make their sentences more intricate, especially when the task requires more complex ideas.

From behaviorist and mentalist perspectives of error, which have emphasized the product (the error itself), to more constructivist views, which focus on underlying process (why the error is made), researchers have attempted to hypothesizing their possible sources (Bartholomae, 1980; Hull, 1985). Although reading an error-filled text can be tiring and disconcerting, errors can help us identify the cognitive strategies that the learner is using to process information. According to Ellis (1985), it is through analyzing learner errors that we elevate “the status of errors from undesirability to that of a guide to the inner working of the language learning process” (p. 53).

Whether an error, mistake, or “derailment,” awkward discourse can occur for a variety of reasons, some of which have already been mentioned. First of all, learners may translate from L1, or they may try out what they assume is a legitimate structure of the target language, although hindered by insufficient knowledge of correct usage. In the learning process, they often experience native language interference from developmental stages of interlanguage or from nonstandard elements in spoken dialects (a common occurrence in students writing in their native language as well). They also tend to over-generalize the rules for stylistic features when acquiring new discourse structures. In addition, learners are often unsure of what they want to express, which would cause them to make mistakes in any language. Finally, writers in L2 might lack familiarity with new rhetorical structures and the organization of ideas (Carson, 2001; Connor & Kaplan, 1987; Kutz, Groden, & Zamel, 1993; Raimes, 1987). L2 writing relates closely to native-language literacy and particular instructional contexts. Students may not be acquainted with English rhetoric, which can lead to writing that appears off topic or incoherent to many native English speakers. Rhetoric and writing are direct outcomes of sociocultural and political contexts; in other words, they are schematic representations of the writer’s unique experiences within a particular social milieu. For example, Chinese or Indonesian students may write in accordance with a set of rhetorical norms (such as the “eight-legged” essay) that differ from those of English (Cai, 1999; Matalene, 1985; Williams, 1989).

Repeating a previous mistake, or backsliding, is a common occurrence in L2 writing. More important, though, is the issue of fossilization—when “learner interlanguage competence diverges in more or less permanent ways from the target language grammar” (Odlin, 1994, p. 13). Fossilized errors can be problematic in writing because the errors become ingrained, like...
Implications for Teaching: Proficiency, Instruction and Response to Error

Although instructors may think of errors as part of a language learning process related to linguistic, situational, and psycholinguistic contexts (Carson, 2001), and writing as a skill developed over time, most L2 learners’ writing is judged according to static and product-based criteria. That teachers draw conclusions about intellectual ability on the basis of structural and grammatical problems has also been well documented (Sternglass, 1997; Zamel, 1998). Variability in writing, which is typical of a learner’s interlanguage, is a concern when addressing proficiency issues. The definition of proficiency has consequences for L2 students as they complete writing tasks across the disciplines, cope with the demands of academic English, and receive recognition as well-informed, critical thinkers.

One problem in assessing language performance is that it must address the many factors related to the contexts in which language is used. According to Bialystok (1998), any definition of language proficiency is deeply entangled in theoretical attitudes. On the one hand, there is the formalist approach, which attempts to explain language as code. According to this perspective, "language proficiency is an unknowable abstraction that reflects the universal competence of native speakers” (p. 502). On the other hand, there is the functionalist approach, which explains proficiency in its relationship to communication in specific contexts. In this respect, communication is “the outcome of social interaction with a linguistic environment” (p. 502). In conversation, often both parties assume some common knowledge and take advantage of verbal and nonverbal communication; however, in written discourse, common knowledge cannot be assumed; therefore, the writer may need to provide more background information in order to communicate clearly.

Language requires a combination of formal structure, that is, a clear set of standards, and communicative application, which includes recognition of variations from the rules. Consequently, a proper definition of language proficiency would “present identifiable standards against which to describe language skills of users in different contexts” (Bialystok, 1998, p. 504). A more complete conceptualization of language performance, then, acknowledges personal characteristics, topical or real-world knowledge, and affective schemata, among other factors related to the social and cultural context (Brown, 2000).

Alongside the cultural and curricular aspects of standardization, there is variability in the ultimate level of proficiency they achieve, with many failing to reach target-language competence. This variation is often the result of individual learner differences in motivation and aptitude, in addition to the use of an assortment of strategies, such as inferencing and self-monitoring for obtaining input and for learning from it (Ellis, 1994; Krashen, 1982). However, instead of setting the standard as a well-defined, functionally balanced system, and proficiency as the degree of deviation from this norm, with errors "marked, counted and statistically analyzed,” Klein (1998) advocates acknowledging learner varieties. According to Klein, these are “systems in their own right, error-free by definition and characterized by particular lexical repertoire and particular interaction of organizational principles” (p. 538). In fact, it may be more useful to think about proficiency as a process, one in which learners alternate in their use of linguistic forms according to the linguistic and situational contexts (Ellis, 1994). From a functionalist perspective, communicative competence in writing should also take into consideration learner variability and error within particular contexts. Nevertheless, the greater the language proficiency (however defined), the better the writing quality. In fact, both language proficiency and writing quality may be enhanced through ongoing feedback and interaction with peers and instructors.
should be, accounted for in evaluating L2 writing performance and instruction (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Valuable insights from research in second language acquisition and writing development can assist in developing instructional techniques linking the two processes—acquiring a second language and developing writing skills, especially for academic purposes. Both Flower (1994) and Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) have stressed the benefits of process approaches to writing and knowledge-transforming tasks. Taking the concept of “knowledge transformation” further in this way is also an opportunity for knowledge building, “as the writer both tries to anticipate the likely response of the envisaged audience and carries on a dialogue with the text being composed” (p. 77). However, if students have not developed learning strategies to monitor their writing errors, and if they do not receive enough conceptual feedback at the discourse level, then the positive effects of the instruction may backfire. Instructional approaches that can be used effectively with L2 writers show us what is at stake for L2 instructors and students alike.

First of all, students may be able to communicate more effectively if they are exposed to models of not only standard paragraphs and essays, but also a variety of genres of writing, including flyers, magazine articles, letters, and so forth. With exposure to different types of texts, students’ awareness can be raised with regard to the way words, structures, and genres contribute to purposeful writing. They can also be made aware of different types of textual organization, which can in turn affect L2 students’ composing processes (Swales, 1990; Raimes, 1991, 1998). Models can also be used for text analysis, which can help L2 writers see how particular grammatical features are used in authentic discourse contexts. Depending on the learners’ levels of proficiency and writing abilities, models can seem fairly formulaic, as in the knowledge-telling model of the five-paragraph essay. However, as the students progress, they need to be aware of a variety of forms that “serve the writer’s purpose instead of the other way around” (Atkinson & Ramanathan, 1995, p. 548). Cazden (1992) advocates the practice of scripting and performing texts in order to sensitize students to the many voices in a reading and how they interact. In this way, models of the target language are reinforced.

In addition to the use of written models, Cumming (1995) also points out the benefits of cognitive modeling in writing instruction, which involves explicit demonstration of the strategies experienced writers use when planning, making decisions, and revising texts. He also advocates that ESL instructors make explicit use of thinking or procedural-facilitation prompts and student self-evaluation as the optimal mode of assessment. Both these approaches promote knowledge-transforming models of composing. Self-evaluation can be encouraged in student portfolios, self-review checklists, and teacher and peer responses. In addition, verbalizing the writing process step-by-step can be effective, as it affords both students and teachers the opportunity to consider writing dialogically. However, convincing students to evaluate their own work requires additional instructional tools, and it may not be effective for all learners. Granted, Cummings refers to self-assessment as a component of one-to-one tutoring sessions, which in contrast to the classroom context, are ideally “more conducive environments for the textual, cognitive, and social dimensions of error identification to be integrated with individual students’ composing processes and their immediate concerns about language, ideas, and texts” (p. 393). Unfortunately, nonetheless, the use of specific prompts for cognitive modeling in different aspects of composing, including error identification, has proved to be valuable.

Apprenticeship models of instruction, which developed out of Vygotsky’s sociocultural theories of language and literacy, are also becoming more common. Proficient students who are also fairly skilled writers can benefit from this approach. They start with what they already know and can do, but their learning is extended into what Vygotsky termed the “zone of proximal development” through strategic
instruction, collaborative construction of opportunities and active participation (Lantolf, 2000; Schinke-Llano, 1995). Apprenticeship models enable learners to utilize the new language as a tool in the process of becoming self-regulatory. Similar to Cumming's suggestions for fostering writing expertise, “students are supported by a scaffold of prompts and explanations, by extensive modeling, by in-process support, and by reflection that connects strategic effort to outcomes” (Flower, 1994, pp. 142-143). Drawing on and revising student knowledge of genres, reflecting on strategies for approaching a variety of literary tasks, and cultivating a metalanguage for discussing texts are important components of socio-literate methods (Johns, 1999).

Students come to class both to improve their language proficiency and become more confident in their writing abilities. They also present diagnostic feedback that helps learners improve their linguistic accuracy at every level of proficiency. Instruction should provide students with ample amounts of language input and instruction, as well as writing experience (preferably through the interweaving of writing and reading, referred to as “intertextuality” (Blanton, 1999), and feedback to fulfill their goals. Overt classroom instruction through modeling, for instance, is only one part of the teaching process; providing students with feedback on their writing is the other. Essentially, we need to consider factors related to language proficiency, second language acquisition, and writing skill development when giving feedback. Specifically, the effectiveness of feedback may depend on the level of students' motivation, their current language level, their cognitive style, the clarity of the feedback given, the way the feedback is used, and the attitudes of students toward their teacher and the class (Ferris, 1997; Goldstein, 2001; Omaggio Hadley, 1993). Classroom settings, course goals, and grading procedures and standards are also important (Leki, 1990). Systematically encouraging learners to reflect on what they want to write and then helping them to make an appropriate choice of language forms has pedagogic value.

We must be aware of the complexities involved in the revision process and respond to writing so that students can make modifications with confidence and competence. Ideally, learners should be encouraged to analyze and evaluate feedback. Teacher commentary, student reactions to commentary, and student revisions interact with each other in a formidable way. How teachers intervene in writing instruction, and how L2 writers react to the feedback, influences the composing process. Should teachers stress early mastery of the mechanical aspects of writing, or should they urge their students to pay little attention to correctness, at least until after a first draft has been written? Again, process models of writing instruction allow students time to reflect and seek input as they reshape their plans, ideas, and language. In classroom practice, the focus is on idea development, clarity, and coherence before identification and grammar correction. Ideally, instruction and response serve to motivate revisions, encourage learning, induce problem-solving and critical thinking, in addition to further writing practice (Cumming, 1989; White, 1994; Zamel, 1987). Indeed, the process approach may be effective, but if writers’ linguistic ability sets limits to what they can do, then we need a combination of process instruction and attention to language development.

Focused error correction can be highly desirable, but problematic. In addition, there are many contradictory findings. The initial impulse for many teachers when reading L2 student writing is to edit the work, that is, focus on the structural aspects so that the writing resembles target language discourse. Teachers can correct errors; code errors; locate errors, and indicate the number of errors. To its benefit, attention to errors “provides the negative evidence students often need to reject or modify their hypotheses about how the target language is formed or functions” (Larsen-Freeman, 1991, p. 293). However, if this focus on error becomes the totality of the response, then language, discourse, and text are equated with structure. It is then assumed that the instructor has the authority to change the student’s text and correct it (Rodby, 1992). In addition, some feel it may not be worth the instructor’s time and effort to provide detailed feedback on sentence level grammar and syntax, since improvement can be gained by writing practice alone (Robb, Ross, & Shortreed,
1986). Practice alone may improve fluency, but if errors are not pointed out and corrected, they can become ingrained or fossilized in student writing, as mentioned earlier. L1 research may advocate for focusing on conception and organization, and not on mechanical errors, except for a “note reminding the student that the final copy needs to be edited” (White, 1994, p. 109). However, survey reports in L2 have indicated that students both attend to and appreciate their teachers’ pointing out of grammar problems (Brice, 1995; Cohen, 1987; Ferris, 1995, 1997; Leki, 1991; Radecki & Swales, 1988). In support of this claim, Fathman and Fathman (1990), from their research on feedback and revision in an ESL context, concluded that grammar and content feedback, whether given separately or together, positively affect rewriting. However, grammatical feedback had more effect on error correction than content. Grammatical and rhetorical feedback should be attentive to the writers’ level of proficiency and degree of readiness (Ferris, 1995, Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996; Lee, 1997; Leki, 1991). Overly detailed responses may overwhelm L2 writers and discourage substantive revision, whereas minimal feedback may result in only surface modifications to the text. Furthermore, learners may be uncertain about what to do with various suggestions and how to incorporate them into their own revision processes. More research on the effectiveness of responses on revision should be examined. (See Sengupta (2000) for research on the effects of explicit teaching of revision strategies on L2 learners’ writing proficiency and perceptions about writing).

Summary and Conclusion

For English L2 writers, the process of writing in an academic environment is challenging. I used to tell my students that the only way to improve their writing is to keep writing—thinking that with enough practice in writing and reflection, they would eventually acquire the fundamentals, or at least the standard, required of academic discourse. Although the process approach to instruction, characterized by practice, collaboration, and the opportunity for revision, may be suitable for most English L1 writers, it is apparent that many L2 writers do not have the necessary linguistic ability to reap the benefits of the approach. As Yau (1991) points out:

Although we should not cripple our students’ interest in writing through undue stress of second language factors on writing performance is something we have to reckon with; the process would automatically resolve the difficulty caused by these factors. (p. 268)

Kern (2000) also mentions that process-oriented teaching does not acknowledge the influence of sociocultural context on individual processes. He has characterized it as inattentive to “learners’ understanding of links between form and communicative conventions that will allow them to construct meanings in ways that are appropriate within the immediate academic context” (p. 182).

Feedback is of utmost importance to the writing process. Without individual attention and sufficient feedback on errors, improvement will not take place. We must accept the fact that L2 writing contains errors; it is our responsibility to help learners to develop strategies for self-correction and regulation. Indeed, L2 writers require and expect specific overt feedback from teachers not only on content, but also on the form and structure of writing. If this feedback is not part of the instructional process, then students will be disadvantaged in improving both writing and language skills.

In order to learn more about L2 writers’ use of language in the process of writing, we need...
utilized in exploring the composing process in L1 writing, such as think-aloud protocols. We also need to understand how students compose in both their native languages and in English to understand more about their learning strategies (especially in monitoring errors), the role of translation, and transfer of skills. Certainly, ethnographic research in L2 writing, along with the acquisition of communicative competence, will help to create a more comprehensive theory of L2 writing.

About the author

Johanne Myles has been teaching ESL, EAP, and TESL for over 20 years in Canada and abroad. She is presently working on a Ph.D in Education with a focus on cultural and curriculum studies at Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada. Her research interests include intercultural communication, second language acquisition and second language writing. She intends to conduct ethnographic research on the communicative competence of engineering students who are non-native speakers of English in the workplace environment when on their internships.

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