

Do the similarities between L1 and L2 writing processes conceal important differences?

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Under the influence of L1 writing studies, attention has shifted from writing product to writing process in recent L2 writing research. This research has revealed more similarities than differences in the writing processes of L1 and L2 writers, and has drawn special attention to the contrast between the writing processes of skilled and unskilled L2 writers, which appear to be very similar to those of their respective L1 counterparts. As an implication of such findings, similar instructional approaches for L1 and L2 writers have been proposed. However, the exaggerated attention attached to the shift from product to process has concealed important differences between L1 and L2 writers, including differences in writing process. This can have unfortunate implications for L2 writing instruction, especially in relation to skilled writers using L2. Differences between L1 and L2 writing that process-oriented instruction has not addressed will be described here, and further research at the intersection of process and product will be proposed as a means of improving instruction for skilled writers using L2.

1. Introduction

Among the various discoveries made after attention shifted from writing equated to written text (writing product) to writing equated to the activities out of which a written text emerges (writing process), the one considered most significant was the revelation that skilled and unskilled writers tend to behave differently during the activity of writing (Stallard 1974, Pianko 1979, Rose 1980, Sommers 1980 & 1981, Perl 1980, Flower and Hayes 1981, Faigley and Witte 1981, Wall and Petrovsky 1981)¹. Skilled writers normally take different audiences into account, plan more, reassess and revise their plans while writing, reread their texts as they write, are concerned with revising meaning before form, and are generally able to do this recursively, i.e., any of these activities can be embedded within any other. Following the above discoveries, the complex mental activities which take place in the mind of the writer began to be acknowledged, and the writing processes of skilled writers began to be seen as part of what unskilled writers needed to understand. The change coincided with a much felt need to reassess traditional product-oriented methods of teaching second language writing, which in the early eighties were criticized on the grounds that they failed to address writing problems which transcended the domain of grammatical accuracy (Zamel 1982, Watson 1982 and Raimes 1983).

In this context, much of the theory, research methodology and pedagogical implications concerning second language writing were imported from first language writing studies. This has greatly contributed to the understanding of what L1 and L2 writing have in common. The shift of attention from product to process in L2 writing research, however, has concealed product-related differences between the two which have significant process implications. In the first part of the present paper I will describe such differences, and argue that the exaggerated importance attached to the writing product/writing process dichotomy is at the root of the misconception that the similarities between L1 and the L2 writing processes call for similar process-oriented writing pedagogies for L1 and L2 writers. In the second part I will argue that high-proficiency/skilled writers using L2 are the ones who have suffered most as a result of this misconception, and that there is much that they can learn from pedagogies which draw on writing process and writing product simultaneously.

2. Similarities and differences in L1 and L2 writing

The findings of second language writing process research pointed above all to the striking similarities between L1 and L2 writing. Zamel (1983) analysed the writing processes of six advanced proficiency ESL writers and reported that the skilled writers in the group - those who did not find the activity of writing "in and of itself problematic" - manifested a more sophisticated understanding of the process of writing in a way which very much resembled how skilled L1 writers behaved during the activity of writing. Raimes (1985) concluded that the writing processes of the unskilled L2 writers she analysed were very similar to those of unskilled L1 writers. Arndt (1987) found that the writing behaviour of her skilled and unskilled Chinese writers of English remained relatively constant, irrespective of whether they wrote in Chinese or in English.

In contrast to the widespread attention the similarities in L1 and L2 writing processes have received, to my knowledge the only difference between L1 and L2 writing that has been adequately documented in the writing process literature is that L2 writers do not appear so inhibited as L1 writers by their own mistakes and attempts to correct them (Raimes 1987). This does not mean I wish to imply that writing process research must have missed out some fundamental point in comparing the writing processes of L1 and L2 writers. On the contrary, I believe the evidence so far collected suggests that there are apparently more similarities than there are differences in the writing processes of the two. In other words, second language writing process research has simply disclosed little evidence of, rather than neglected, any significant differences there might be in the writing processes of L1 and L2 writers. The point I am trying to make is that the more serious problems that L2 but not L1 writers experience have to do primarily with linguistic proficiency, but it is important to note that this can also indirectly constrain their writing processes.

The most obvious of the differences between L1 and L2 writers which does not immediately have to do with writing process is that of linguistic competence. This competence is usually associated with writing products, for the texts by L2 writers are normally dotted with a lot more errors than those by L1 writers with equivalent writing skills. It is not, however, just the writing products of L2 writers that are affected by low second language proficiency. Low proficiency L2 writers have to overcome lexical and syntactical barriers that simply do not concern their L1 counterparts to the same extent. As a consequence of such additional linguistic barriers, their writing processes too may suffer. According to Widdowson (1983), the non-automation of the syntactic rules of a language can have a negative effect upon the writer's ability to deal with its discourse function because his mental resources will be overly preoccupied with achieving linguistic correctness. Similarly, Daiute (1984) found that the automation of certain aspects of writing such as syntax and access to lexis can drastically reduce the burden upon the writer's short-term memory, and in consequence allow more space for competing higher-level mental activities that take place during writing.

There is another important, if less obvious, difference between L1 and L2 writers which on the surface has little to do with writing process. It is a well documented fact in the literature that different languages are governed by different discourse conventions (Kaplan 1972, 1983; Guillemin-Flescher 1981; Clyne 1984; Regent 1985 - to cite only a few examples). It is also recognized that these conventions can be transferred from L1 to L2 (Kaplan 1983; Rutherford 1983). Scarcella (1984) found that although knowledge of L2 discourse conventions more or less correlates with second language proficiency, the discourse of high-proficiency L2 writers can still be significantly different from that of L1 writers. In other words, there appears to be an upper limit to such a correlation in the sense that high-proficiency L2 writers can also experience the additional difficulty of not knowing enough about the discourse conventions of the L2. Zamel (1983) reported that even her high-proficiency L2 writers who behaved like skilled writers - because they

understood the recursive nature of writing - experienced difficulties and frustrations in relation to stylistic choices in L2. She does not, however, seem to have attached much importance to the possibility that the decision-making protocol of the writer could be related to his knowledge of discourse, and that the difficulties and frustrations her high-proficiency L2 writers experienced with respect to stylistic choices could also indirectly constrain their writing processes.

While writing according to the discourse conventions of any particular genre can be second nature to L1 writers who are familiar with the genre in question, L2 writers who are familiar with the discourse conventions of an equivalent genre in their L1 cannot blindly rely on their L1 intuitions when writing in L2. If they do, then it is likely that their writing products will suffer negative transfer. To take a bi-directional example of what could be the consequences of such transfer, Clyne (1984) has pointed out that texts by German-speaking scholars are generally perceived as being longwinded, opaque and partially irrelevant by their English-speaking counterparts and, conversely, that texts by English-speaking scholars tend to be seen as simplistic and laymanlike in the eyes of their German-speaking colleagues. If, on the other hand, L2 writers try to make use of L2 discourse conventions, writing according to L2 discourse conventions can represent an additional burden on their mental activities during the writing process because for them this is not necessarily a question of writing within well-learned formats. In other words, attempts to incorporate the conventions of a foreign rhetorical system can constrain writing processes in the same way as attempts to incorporate foreign lexis and syntax.

It therefore seems that in having attached so much importance to the writing process/product dichotomy, process research has paid too little attention not only to the two fundamental product-related differences between L1 and L2 writers - strictly linguistic competence and knowledge of language-specific discourse conventions - but also to the process implications these differences might have. This brings me to the second point of this discussion, namely, that those who have called for similar pedagogical approaches for L1 and L2 writers have failed to take into account such differences between the two.

When it comes to assessing the repercussions of second language writing process research upon second language writing pedagogies, the emphasis placed on the product/process dichotomy and the consequent undue emphasis assigned to the similarities in the writing processes of L1 and L2 writers is at the root of the following misconceived claims:

"approaches to the teaching of composition ESL teachers may have felt only appropriate for native speakers [...] may be effective for teaching all levels of writing, including ESL composition"
(Zamel 1982:203)

"significant similarities in pedagogical applications are called for."
(Krashen 1984:38)

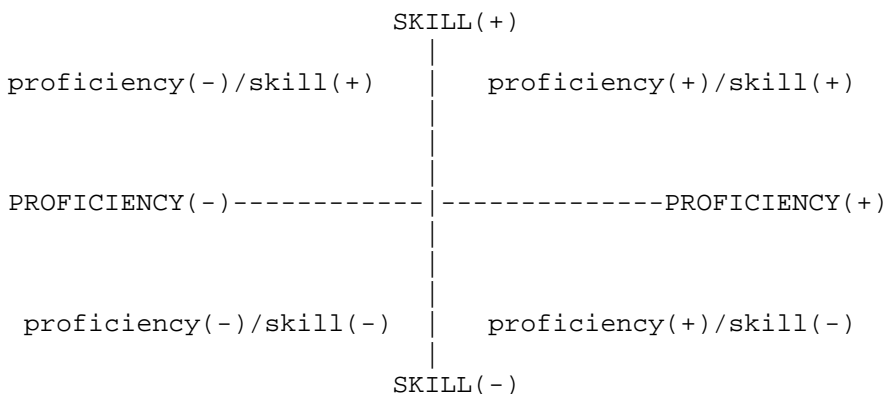
"... the similarities noted between the processes of ESL student writers and native-speaker students suggest that many of the teaching techniques recommended for L1 students are appropriate for L2 learners as well."
(Raimes 1987:460)

The first flaw in the above reasoning is one of inconsistency. While process research has acknowledged the non-trivial distinction between the writing processes of skilled and unskilled writers (using L1 or L2) in drawing attention

to the similarities between L1 and L2 writers, it has failed to see the importance this distinction might have in relation to L2 writing instruction². To put it differently, unskilled writers using L2, just like unskilled writers using L1, may indeed benefit from learning about what skilled writers do when they write. To help these L2 writers become aware of their audiences, to help them realize that writing is a process of discovering meaning, that it is recursive, that planning a text is important, that plans should be flexible, that revision should give priority to meaning, and that editing is merely a matter of polishing an already well-planned text, might have a positive effect not only on their L2 writing products, but even their L1 texts might benefit from such type of instruction³. However, in theory this would also mean that skilled writers using L2, just like skilled writers using L1, should find process-oriented instruction redundant. After all, to teach skilled writers how to plan a text from scratch and all else the activity of writing involves is to teach them what they already know. The theoretical implication of this rationale is therefore that, in the same way as skilled writers using L1, skilled writers using L2 do not need any writing instruction.

The differences in the writing of L1 and L2 writers referred to earlier in this paper suggest that not only high and low proficiency *unskilled* writers using L2 but also high and low proficiency *skilled* writers using L2 can benefit from L2 writing instruction. Or rather, if one recognizes that L2 writing is based upon both the axis of proficiency and the axis of writing skill, it should be obvious that L2 writing instruction must distinguish between at least the four extreme combinations along them (c.f. figure 1 below).

Figure 1-: The four extreme combinations along the axes of writing proficiency and skill



The inconsistency factor of process-oriented L2 writing instruction therefore lies in a failure to take into account the differences in writing skill highlighted by process research. The consequent deficiency of L2 process-oriented writing instruction is then its neglect of the positive half of the axis of skill, for no distinction is made between skilled and unskilled L2 writers: the emphasis placed on writing skills implies that both tend to be treated as if they were unskilled writers.

Another deficiency seems to be that the supporters of L2 process-oriented instruction have interpreted the axis of proficiency too narrowly. After all, as far as writing is concerned, proficiency is not limited to syntax and lexis; it also, and very significantly, includes knowledge of L2 discourse conventions. What seems to have occurred is that such discourse knowledge has been implicitly perceived as belonging more to the axis of skill than to the axis of proficiency. In other words, in failing to acknowledge that not all discourse conventions are language-universals, the discursal problems of L2 writers have often been perceived as problems of writing skills rather than as problems of second language proficiency. For example, after Raimes (1987) described the

revision of both her skilled and unskilled writers using L2 as being "haphazard", she proceeded to suggest that what these writers needed most was further practice in relation to planning, writing, rereading, revising and editing. It seems that Raimes was unaware that what could be "haphazard" to her could in fact be systematic in terms of her writers' L1. This is not at all surprising, for more often than not one is so accustomed to the schemata that govern the discourse conventions of one's native language (Steffensen 1986) that one is likely to attach little significance to the possible transfer of schemata that govern the discourse conventions of other languages. If L1 discourse conventions which do not coincide with L2 conventions are transferred to L2 texts, it is therefore not unlikely that they will be interpreted by native readers as a sign of lack of writing skills. Similarly, it is not uncommon for an incoherent text by an L2 writer to be coherent in terms of the way in which discourse is organized in his L1. It is very likely that incoherence would in this case be seen more as a lack of understanding of the notion of coherence than as a lack of understanding of how coherence can be realized in L2.



Notwithstanding the above flaws, it is also true that process-oriented L2 pedagogies can deal with the problems of L2 writers in general in a way which represents a considerable improvement on what product-oriented pedagogies are able to offer. Indeed, the problems regarding pedagogies which give special emphasis to written products are well known and fairly uncontroversial. According to Raimes (1983), product-oriented approaches to the teaching of L2 writing tend to encourage learners to disregard content and produce grammatically accurate, but otherwise flat and uninteresting texts. For Zamel (1982), such approaches are overly preoccupied with correctness and end up overlooking meaning and the ways ideas can be put down on paper. Thus in addition to not having taken into account the axis of skill, product-oriented pedagogies also seem to have addressed only part of the axis of proficiency. Because writing skills can affect writing products, and because both syntactic and discursal proficiency can constrain writing process, what is needed is not a backwards shift from process to product research, but further research at the crossroads of the two.

3. What else can high proficiency/skilled writers using L2 learn?

If on the one hand process-oriented instructional approaches to L2 writing have addressed mainly the skill(-) component of writing, on the other hand product-oriented instruction has concentrated on only a narrow aspect of its proficiency(-) component. The most urgent need in exploring the intersection of process and product therefore seems to be to investigate whether it can address the writing problems of proficiency(+)/skill(+) writers using L2 (c.f. figure 2 below).

Figure 2: Main emphasis of process and product-oriented L2 writing Instruction

Proficiency + Skill -	Proficiency + Skill +
Proficiency - Skill -	Proficiency - Skill +

 MAIN EMPHASIS OF PROCESS-ORIENTED INSTRUCTION
 MAIN EMPHASIS OF PRODUCT-ORIENTED INSTRUCTION

Neither process nor product-oriented L2 writing pedagogies have left much room for improvement in the writing of those who are already skilled in terms of writing and proficient in terms of L2 syntax and lexis. While process-oriented pedagogies have given too much attention to teaching these writers skills they already possess, product-oriented pedagogies have promoted little more than standards of correctness these writers are already aware of. It would be interesting to see how much Clyne's (1984) German-speaking scholars who were proficient in English would learn from EAP pedagogies which "taught" them to become aware of their audiences and how to plan, write, reread and revise their texts recursively by paying attention primarily to meaning. It would be equally interesting to see how much these writers would learn from pedagogies which encouraged them to avoid errors and write in a flat and uninteresting way, or worse, only prized the standards of correctness of their texts while at the same time allowing them to go on being opaque, longwinded and partially irrelevant. □

As already implied in the first part of this paper, what these writers seem to need most is to become aware of the discourse conventions of the genres they wish to master in L2, and then to be able to use them in a way which does not have the washback side-effect of overburdening their minds during the activity of writing. Two conditions must be met if this is to occur.

First, both high-proficiency/skilled writers using L2 and their writing teachers must decentre from the discourse conventions of their L1 in order to accept that these conventions are not universal across languages. High-proficiency/skilled writers using L2 have often been heard to complain that their writing teacher told them to rewrite parts of their texts which they thought were well written in the first place; conversely, EAP teachers have often been heard to complain that their feedback on specialist essays is sometimes declined on the grounds that they do not understand enough about the jargon of certain disciplines. Obviously the trade-off between the L2 writer's knowledge of subject and the EAP teacher's knowledge of language is not a straightforward matter (James 1984). However, many of these misunderstandings, I believe, occur when teachers and learners fail to decentre from the schemata which rule the discourse conventions of their native languages. Recognizing that such conventions are not universal could therefore help writers accept the comments of their writing teachers more readily, and help writing teachers explain more clearly not only what exactly it is that needs rewriting in L2 texts, but also how these texts can be rewritten in a way which conforms more to L2 discourse conventions. For example, I believe Raimes' (1987) learners whose revision was "haphazard" would benefit a lot more if the problems in their texts were pointed out to them in an explicit and decentred way, and if they were then helped with the discourse conventions and linguistic resources needed to address such problems, than if they were simply

given the opportunity of further planning, rereading and revising practice. To take another example, German learners of English could learn a lot more if their writing teachers provided them with explicit feedback on the pragmatic distinction between the use of simple and complex sentences in written English discourse than if their teachers simply told them that their style was longwinded, and asked them to rewrite their texts bearing this in mind⁴.

The second condition that must be met if the writing of high-proficiency/skilled writers using L2 is to improve, is to ensure first that these writers learn to see for themselves what in their texts does not conform to L2 discourse conventions, and then that they learn to revise their L2 texts on their own. If they are able to go over their products in this way first deliberately and later automatically⁵, it may be possible to eradicate much of what overburdens their minds but not that of skilled L1 writers during the activity of writing.

The reason why a pedagogy based on the above principles is neither process nor product-oriented but lies at the intersection of process and product is that both are needed for the two conditions mentioned to be met. In terms of process, what is required is not to teach these writers how to plan, write, reread and revise their texts, but to draw on these recursive subprocesses of writing in order to provide them with decentred feedback at any point during the activity of writing. In this way it is possible to train them to apply the knowledge they have acquired from teacher-feedback while planning, writing and rereading, and hence minimize the burden of what is left for them to rewrite in the final revision stage. In other words, it is not corrective feedback on a final draft alone that will help these learners improve their texts; Robb et. al (1986) have shown this is of little consequence. For writers to benefit from teacher feedback, feedback (not corrective, but of the type described earlier) should be provided at any time it is required during the writing process, and preferably when doubts arise. After all, the doubts and problems that arise during the activity of writing seem to constitute the best opportunities for learning from someone else how to overcome them (Smith 1982).

In terms of product, what is required is to draw the attention of high-proficiency/skilled writers using L2 to how the discourse of their L2 written products may sometimes be at variance with target language conventions. One way this can be achieved is by training L2 writers to engage themselves in comparing the discourse conventions of texts by native speakers with those of their own L2 texts as they read. In this way it is possible for the former to develop a measure of ways in which their plans and drafts go against L2 discourse conventions, and hence learn to evaluate and revise them in the absence of teacher feedback. According to De Beaugrande (1980:286),

"Learners who acquire workable standards for evaluating their own prose as a protocol for decision-making need not rely constantly on the teacher's feedback."

Feedback-independence is important for two reasons. Firstly, and most obviously, because L2 writers cease to receive teacher-feedback as soon as instruction is over. It is therefore crucial to ensure that writers avoid becoming dependent on it. Secondly, and less obviously, feedback-independence in all stages of writing is important because it is a necessary condition for the use of L2 discourse conventions to become automatic, and in this way no longer indirectly constrain the writing processes of L2 writers. According to Dakin (1973:163), ultimate success is only achieved when "the learner can perform correctly without bothering to think why or how."

The writing processes of high-proficiency/skilled writers using L2 can only be said to be similar to those of skilled writers using L1 when the use of L2

discourse conventions by the former becomes as automatic as it is for the latter.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, I hope to have made it clear that concealed behind the similarities in the writing of L1 and L2 writers disclosed by second language process research there are significant differences and significant implications of such differences that must be acknowledged by second language writing instruction. I cannot overly stress, however, that the deficiencies of recent process-oriented pedagogies that have been pointed out in this paper do not in any way mean that I am advocating a return to traditional product-oriented pedagogies. What is needed is further research at the crossroads of process and product, which seems to constitute a very promising point of departure for addressing the questions process research has left unanswered. Particularly pressing in this respect is the need to explore ways in which one can minimize the obstacles in the path of high-proficiency/skilled writers using L2, who in recent years have been all but neglected at the expense of the emphasis placed on the difficulties of unskilled writers using L2.

Notes

1. In the studies referred to, the skilled writers were mostly those who took up writing as a profession and the unskilled writers were those enrolled in remedial writing courses in American universities.
2. To my knowledge, this distinction has not been adequately dealt with in the literature. Zamel, for example, has often referred to advanced or high-proficiency L2 writers without making it sufficiently clear whether this proficiency was relative to writing skill or to linguistic competence or to both.
3. Process-oriented writing instruction is probably beneficial when the L1 of an unskilled writer using L2 is not a literate language or when it is more important for him to write in L2 than in L1. In both cases, writing skill is more relevant to the L2 context. Otherwise, the question of whether unskilled writers using L2 would benefit from process instruction conducted in L2 rather than L1 is bound to raise much controversy with respect to its sociolinguistic implications.
4. Hamp-Lyons and Heasley (1987) have most aptly drawn attention to such a distinction in their EAP course book *Study Writing*. Similarly, Huckin (1983) has referred to the relationship between sentence-complexity and the psycholinguistic phenomenon known as "level-effect", in which readers tend to process text hierarchically, assigning less importance to subordinate elements low in the hierarchy than to titles, topic sentences and other non-subordinate elements high in the hierarchy. Given that the elements higher in the text-hierarchy have been shown to be easier to recall (Walker and Meyer 1980), it is natural that the most important points in a text should be expressed via non-subordinate, syntactically prominent constructions. Although the "levels-effect" phenomenon could be a language-universal and therefore have little to do with the specific conventions of written English, Clyne (1984) has pointed out that German expository texts are less hierarchical than English ones. This could mean that the "levels-effect" phenomenon is not so decisive in German as it is in English, and that the readers of German do not depend so much on the cues provided by text-hierarchies. This could therefore explain in part why the texts by German writers seem longwinded in the eyes of native English readers.

5. The idea that conscious learning promotes non-conscious development is not novel. Among its most prominent defenders is Vygotsky (1962). In contrast, Krashen and Terrel (1983) are radical opponents of such a view, for they maintain that second language development can only be achieved via the spontaneous acquisition route. One must remember, however, that unlike speakers, writers have considerably more time to plan and modify what they want to say (Luria 1982). Before a text is finalized, writers can use the permanent quality of written language to their advantage in order to rethink and rewrite their initial drafts. L2 writers who have consciously learned to distinguish between what does and does not conform to the target language discourse conventions can utilize this knowledge to reject the latter as they revise their plans and drafts, and this very rejection can in turn be a learning experience. The next time they write the probability of their having to reject again should be smaller. At length, this might enable L2 writers bridge the gap between a deliberate awareness and a more spontaneous use of L2 discourse conventions.

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