

SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING INSTRUCTION

**A Study of the Effects
of a Discourse-Oriented Programme
upon the Ability of Skilled Writers
to Improve their Written Production**

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I declare that this thesis has been composed by myself and that the work entailed by it is entirely my own.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that process-oriented approaches to second language writing instruction have been overly influenced by first language writing theory and that, in consequence, these pedagogies have paid too much notice to the difficulties encountered by unskilled writers. The thesis calls for the need for second language writing instruction to recognize the differences between skilled and unskilled writers and address the specific difficulties of the former. It is reasoned that skilled writers using L2 need far more support with regard to acquiring language-specific standards with which to evaluate their own prose than with regard to developing writing process planning, writing, rereading and revising skills (which they already possess). The empirical part of this study investigates the effects of a discourse-oriented programme of L2 writing instruction upon the ability of skilled writers to improve their written production. The pedagogy tested did not attempt to teach writing process strategies, but sought to provide a group of eight Brazilian researchers writing in English with parameters with which to improve the readability of their writing products in the absence of teacher feedback. Pre and post-instruction samples of expository texts and revision data by these writers disclose evidence that the instruction carried out was effective and efficient: the writers were able to improve the readability of their writing products and acquire standards with which to evaluate their own prose in the absence of teacher feedback after a very short instructional period. Although it was not possible to work with a control group, a detailed analysis of the revision data suggests that the above developments are more likely to have been outcomes of the specific instruction provided than outcomes of any type of writing instruction. It was concluded that skilled writers using L2 may greatly benefit from instruction which focuses on how L2 discourse is organized, and that the teaching of writing process strategies need not be a priority when the learners in question are already skilled writers. A final concern of the study was to learn more about instruction for skilled writers using L2. Its most important exploration in this respect suggests that instruction must strive to help these writers overcome language-specific difficulties that emerge during the process of writing. These difficulties are not always visible in finished products, and may easily be mistaken for lack of writing skill.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Second language writing

Scholars for whom speculation precedes research and researchers who take empirical investigation as a starting point follow different methodological paths. The aim of both is to progress towards the construction of a new theory or the modification of existing theories so as to invest them with greater explanatory force. Although the balanced interplay of these two approaches is vital to the progress of scientific enquiry, to my knowledge most studies in the field of writing in a language other than one's mother tongue (L2) have been concerned with the investigation of isolated phenomena from a primarily empirical point of view. Indeed, research in the area has been carried out mostly in America, where the tradition of empiricism is to a large extent predominant.

As a probable result of this preponderance, what is presently known about L2 writing consists of a series of fragmentary findings which, though highly replicable, I believe have led to some rather premature assumptions concerning L2 writing instruction. Central to this question

is the fact that much of what has been recently investigated in terms of L2 writing was done under the extensive influence of a first language (L1) writing framework. Shadowing L1 writing theory and research methods, recent developments in the area of L2 writing have temporarily relegated writing product to a backstage position, and paid particular attention to writing process. A great number of similarities in the writing processes of L1 and L2 writers were disclosed, and similar instructional approaches for the two were consequently proposed.

The present study takes as a starting point my doubt as to whether similar instructional approaches for L1 and L2 writers is the most logical corollary of the two having similar writing processes. In reviewing previous writing research and theory, I develop a conceptual framework which, going against current influence from first language writing theory, justifies treating L1 and L2 writers differently. I maintain that the excessive importance attached to the writing process end of the process-product dichotomy has concealed important product-related differences between L1 and L2 writers which may have serious, albeit largely neglected, process implications. I then expand on this framework by speculating that if it is true that the writing processes of L1 and L2 writers are similar, skilled writers using L2 must be treated differently from unskilled writers using L2. That is to

say, instruction for L2 writers with efficient writing process skills must be different from instruction for L2 writers with inadequate writing process skills. I contend that failing to distinguish between the two may have unfortunate implications for L2 writing instruction, especially when the learners in question are skilled writers.

1.2 Why skilled writers using L2?

The very distinction made between skilled and unskilled writers implies that the latter have a lot more to learn. The logical question that arises is why concentrate on skilled writers if it is the unskilled who need most help. My answer is that many of the needs of the unskilled have already been recognized and catered for under the influence of pedagogical implications derived from L1 writing studies. However, there does not seem to exist a theory which sustains an approach to teaching L2 writing tailored to suit the somewhat different needs of L2 writers who are already skilled, i.e., those whose writing process strategies are efficient. L2 writing instruction must recognize that the needs of skilled writers using L2 can be very different from those of unskilled writers using L2. While this distinction is irrelevant to L1 inasmuch as skilled writers using L1 do not need any writing instruction, skilled writers using L2 do need instruction

and one must strive to come to a better understanding of the kind of instruction they would benefit from. I believe that treading in the shadow of L1 writing theory, most of the currently fashionable L2 writing courses pay too much notice to the difficulties encountered by unskilled writers, and end up overlooking the most precious asset that skilled writers using L2 possess: writing skill, which means that they need not be taught how to write all over again.

From a more pragmatic viewpoint, my interest in instruction for skilled writers using L2 has emerged out of a concern with the obstacles in the path of researchers whose native language is not one of widespread international communication. Many of these researchers are highly skilled writers whose work is simply not accessible to the international scientific community if they do not write and publish in an L2. Brazilian researchers who write only in Portuguese, for example, will not be much read outside Brazil, Portugal and the former Portuguese colonies in Africa and Asia. Likewise, the work by Dutch researchers who publish only in Dutch is bound to contribute very little to the progress of scientific enquiry outside the Dutch-speaking community. It is therefore crucial that researchers who are handicapped by an L1 of limited international comprehension possess a sound working knowledge of an L2 which is more accessible to their counterparts of different first language backgrounds.

Instruction which recognizes that these researchers are more often than not extremely skilled writers can be a lot more effective than instruction which treats L1 and L2 writers alike and, in consequence, tends to place too much emphasis on the difficulties encountered by the unskilled.

Insofar as the empirical part of this study is concerned, I do not attempt to refute the effectiveness of current L1-influenced approaches to L2 writing instruction. My preference is for a theory which recognizes that the needs of skilled writers using L2 are different from those of unskilled writers, and it follows that I believe it is fairly urgent to concentrate on the specific needs of the former. My aim is therefore to test the validity of a pedagogical approach which recognizes what skilled writers using L2 already know, and seeks to help them produce more readable writing products and acquire workable standards for evaluating their own prose. Parallel to this, I will attempt to come to a deeper understanding of the kind of instruction skilled writers using L2 would benefit from.

1.3 Situational context

Although I am interested in skilled writers using L2 in general, the testing of a pedagogy entailed by a given theory necessarily involves sampling. I specifically chose to work with a group of Brazilian researchers writing in

English because of my familiarity with Portuguese and English, and also because this research was sponsored by the Brazilian government. I must nevertheless stress that although this research was conducted with skilled Brazilian-Portuguese writers of English, its applications may concern any similar group of skilled writers using L2.

Very briefly, the situational context relevant to this research is as follows. English is undisputably the most valuable foreign language for Brazilian researchers who wish to divulge their work to the international scientific community. English is also the language of the majority of the research centres Brazilians join abroad in the case of a particular discipline not being well-explored or available in Brazil. Although Brazilian researchers are for the most part skilled writers who represent one of the most literate sectors of the Brazilian population, the current picture of the standard of writing in scientific English by Brazilian researchers is not a very bright one. The English that is taught in Brazilian secondary schools as well as the language substance of most alternative EFL courses in Brazil cater for little more than basic communication skills. It follows that even the researchers who have attended such courses are unlikely to have been taught much about scientific writing in English. Not surprisingly, Brazilian researchers who seek to publish in English or develop their work in English-speaking countries often find their working knowledge of English by and large inadequate.

The lack of specialist EFL writing courses in Brazil does not mean there are no such courses elsewhere. However, very few Brazilian researchers have access to specialist EFL writing courses abroad, for their cost is prohibitive for a country facing economic hardships like Brazil. This does not mean that this research purports to address merely or essentially a financial problem. As already implied, the main problem envisaged is the general lack of EFL writing courses which recognize that these researchers are experienced writers who are already familiar with Portuguese scientific discourse, and who above all need not be taught how to write all over again.

1.4 Outline of the thesis

The remaining parts of this dissertation are organized as follows. In chapter two my aim is to develop the conceptual framework upon which the present study is to be founded. I review the literature in writing process and second language writing theory and research, and argue that research into L2 writing has all but neglected the highly specific needs of skilled writers using L2. I conclude the chapter by expanding my views on what can be done to help these writers improve their L2 writing products.

In chapter three I describe the empirical part of this study, which consists of applying the pedagogical approach entailed by the theory developed in chapter two. The aims of the investigation are :

- to test whether eight Brazilian researchers using English as an L2 are able to produce more readable writing products after instruction has ceased;

- to test whether they will have acquired workable standards to evaluate and then improve their own prose by themselves, i.e., in the absence of any cues or feedback from their writing teacher;

- and to come to a better understanding of the kind of instruction these writers would benefit from in the future.

The chapter gives details about the participants, the procedure for collecting data, and the materials and method utilized in the course on writing which constituted ^{the} the experimental treatment. In the final section of chapter I ^X outline the different phases of analysis and interpretation to which the data collected was submitted.

Chapter four reports on the first phase of analysis and interpretation of results. It explains how the readability of the writing products by the participants was assessed, and tests whether their post-instruction writing products were more readable than their pre-instruction writing products.

Chapter five is the first of the three chapters dedicated to the second and more extensive phase of analysis and interpretation of the data. A system for analysing revision which seeks to provide a detailed reader-oriented account of all that changed as a result of the participants' post-treatment revision of essays produced prior to the experimental treatment is developed.

The first part of chapter six provides a purely descriptive overview of the results obtained from the application of the system of analysis developed in chapter five to the post-treatment revisions by the participants. The second and third parts of chapter six focus on the interpretation of the analysis from the viewpoints of readability and feedback-independence. Their aim is to test whether the participants were able to revise and further improve the readability of their pre-instruction writing products after instruction had ceased, and whether the post-instruction revisions by these writers hold evidence to an increase in their ability to revise their own prose in the absence of teacher feedback. The chapter also considers what future

instruction should address, and advances some preliminary conclusions on the relationship between readability, feedback-independence and writing instruction.

Chapter seven seeks to test whether improved readability and increased feedback-independence are likely outcomes of the specific instruction provided, as opposed to outcomes of any type of instruction. For the matter, the revision data analysed in chapter six is submitted to a further stage of analysis and interpretation, which is grounded on the distinction between revision changes directly related to the instruction provided and revision changes unrelated or only indirectly related to that instruction.

In chapter eight I review my original motivation for undertaking this research, I highlight the study's most distinctive findings and discuss their contribution towards the development of instruction for skilled writers using L2. I also reevaluate the conceptual framework put forward in chapter two, and I outline suggestions for future research in the area. I conclude the chapter by discussing a number of implications for the teaching of writing to skilled writers using L2.