

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING8.1 Conclusions

My motivation to undertake the present investigation arose from the need to address the specific difficulties encountered by skilled writers using L2. I reasoned that shadowing L1 theory and research methods, recent approaches to L2 writing instruction have paid too much notice to the similarities in the writing processes of L1 and L2 writers, and have consequently failed to account for important differences between the two. The most unfortunate implication of treating L1 and L2 writers alike, I argued, is that the needs of skilled writers using L2 can be very easily neglected. First language writing instruction was conceived for unskilled writers, but second language writing instruction must address the needs of the skilled as well as those of the unskilled. Based on this reevaluation of current influence from L1 writing studies upon second language instruction, I developed a conceptual framework which justifies distinguishing between the following four extreme combinations along the axes of writing skill and second language proficiency:

1. + skill + proficiency
2. - skill + proficiency
3. + skill - proficiency
4. - skill - proficiency

Thinking of the needs of highly literate researchers whose first language is not one of international scientific communication, I proceeded to test the validity of a pedagogical approach which sought to concentrate on the specific needs of intermediate to high-proficiency skilled writers using L2, i.e. more or less the first of the above. At the same time, I attempted to come to a better understanding of the kind of instruction these writers might benefit from.

Drawing on the work by authors interested in discorsal differences between languages, and on the claim that insufficient knowledge of L2 discourse conventions may constrain writing processes, I hypothesized that intermediate to high-proficiency skilled writers using L2 would be able to improve the readability of their writing products and acquire workable standards to evaluate their own prose after receiving instruction which gave special emphasis to the teaching of L2 discourse conventions. The pedagogy tested specifically attempted to make a group of eight Brazilian researchers writing in English aware of a number of discourse conventions their L2 texts seemed to violate, and purposefully did not emphasize the development

of writing skills, although it did draw on their existing, presumably already efficient, writing process strategies.

Samples of pre and post-instruction writing products by the above group of writers were then compared via holistic impression judgements on readability and via a three-dimensional system for analysing revision in terms of the effect of changes upon readability plus their description from the viewpoints of reading process and writing product. The analysis and interpretation of the results disclosed evidence of the following:

H1: The participants were able to produce more readable texts after instruction had ceased (c.f. chapter four).

H2: After instruction had ceased, the participants were able to further improve the readability of texts produced before instruction (c.f. chapter six).

H3: The participants' post-instruction revisions of pre-instruction final drafts pointed towards a general increase in feedback-independence (c.f. chapter six).

H4: Improved readability and increased feedback-independence are likely to have been outcomes of the specific kind of instruction provided (c.f. chapter seven).

The pedagogy tested therefore seems to have helped a group of Brazilian researchers writing in English improve the readability of their writing products and learn about standards with which to evaluate their own prose in the absence of teacher-feedback. Granted that it is usually the case that the more there is to improve, the easier it is to perceive improvement, the fact that the learners in question were intermediate to high-proficiency skilled writers - and hence had a lot less to learn about second language writing than if they had been low-proficiency unskilled writers - suggests that the improvement perceived was especially significant. Moreover, the fact that these results were obtained after a period of instruction of only thirty hours (constrained by a number of experimental control measures) seems to constitute further proof that the pedagogical approach proposed is likely to have addressed the needs of this particular group of writers in a way which was both effective and efficient.

The above claim is obviously based exclusively on the practical effects of the pedagogy tested upon readability and feedback-independence. However, in educational research it is also important to evaluate how learners react to a given type of pedagogy, for it is essential that they believe in the instruction received. Even if instruction is proven to have achieved its objectives, its success or

failure will ultimately depend upon whether or not it has face validity.

At this point, the participants' responses to the retrospective questionnaire in appendix II therefore also deserve being considered, for they disclose useful information about the participants' reactions to the discourse-oriented instruction they received. In this retrospective questionnaire, which was given to the participants after instruction had ceased and after the post-treatment essays had been collected, the participants were initially asked to assess on a 1-5 scale how much the different aspects of the course had contributed to their learning¹. Table 8.1 below summarizes their responses.

Table 8.1: Contribution of different aspects of the course towards the participants' learning processes according to their intuitions (1=very little; 5=a lot)

<u>ASPECT OF THE COURSE</u>	<u>MEDIAN</u>	<u>RANGE</u>
Course handouts	5	4-5
Revising with a partner	5	4-5
Revising own texts	5	3-5
Revising partner's text	5	2-5
Course bibliography	5	2-5
Writing last three essays	4	4-5
Revising alone	4	3-5
Reading NS texts	4	2-5
<u>Writing first three essays</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>3-4</u>

According to these responses, it is clear that the discourse-oriented pedagogy tested scored high in terms of general acceptance. The three parts of the course which

could have allowed the participants to develop a feeling for L2 discourse conventions were the course handouts, the course bibliography and reading NS texts. The participants not only thought the three contributed quite a lot to their learning, but also felt that writing practice after instruction contributed more to their learning than writing practice alone. In addition to this, the opportunity to practice revision after the discourse conventions had been presented was generally thought have been very helpful.

I was nevertheless interested in finding out whether teaching the participants about L2 discourse conventions could have in any way catalysed the washback side-effect of constraining writing process, which would have had negative repercussions upon the overall validity of the pedagogy tested. The participants' responses to question two in the retrospective questionnaire, **"Did the conventions discussed during the course in any way block (inhibit) your facility of writing? Did they in any way make writing easier?"**, added strength to my prediction that this kind of washback effect was unlikely²². All participants reported that the conventions discussed during the course had not blocked their writing processes, and had in fact made writing easier. The following comments are representative of how the participants supported their views on this particular matter:

"I do not think the conventions we have seen inhibited my writing [...some] conventions function as guidelines when we are writing for the first time [...others] are fundamental when it is time to revise the essay. Revising became more practical and easier."

"I don't think that the conventions we have discussed blocked me at any rate. Instead they improved my writing and consequently increased my wish to write"

"The conventions presented have facilitated my writing in all general aspects. Now, during and after a first draft, I think about connectives, adverbs, etc., and after the final draft the text seems to be more clear. Similarly, when I am reading a paper I can see the conventions easily"

The above seems to add strength to one of the explanations given in chapter seven, as to why slightly over half the changes made from T3 to T3* were not actually treatment-specific: the reduced writing process constraints brought about by the discourse-oriented instruction provided could have allowed the participants more room for reassessing and improving lower-level components of text which had not been discussed during the treatment.

The next question I was interested in was whether the participants perceived themselves as being more independent from feedback, which is another point that has to be considered when evaluating the participants' reactions towards the instruction provided. Question three in the retrospective questionnaire, **"Now that the course has ended, do you feel you are more prepared than before to**

improve your writing on your own?", was answered unanimously in the affirmative. When asked to explain why, the participants invariably reported that it was because of the parts of the course which focused on making them aware of L2 discourse conventions. In this respect, the following comments were representative:

"...because [the course] taught me to read the NS paper not only considering the subject but also the shape of the text..."

"Using the handouts [...] and the bibliography as a guide, I think that anyone who wants to improve both writing and reading [...] will be able to do it on his own."

"Now, all aspects of your course are considered when I am writing an English text. I think improvement [...] will be greater when I read the bibliography "

"[Because] I am sure I increased my attention and accuracy to writing, and my relation to the use of dictionary, Thesaurus and texts by NS."

"The handouts [...] will help us write papers in English. It is really good we can keep them"

The above comments clearly indicate that the participants tended to support their answers to question three by making explicit reference to the parts of instruction which sought to make them aware of target language discourse conventions, as opposed to other aspects of the course. That is to say, they seem to have preferred supporting the

claim that they feel better prepared to improve their writing on their own because of what they were able to learn from the course handouts, the course bibliography and the way in which they were encouraged to read NS texts, than because of other factors such as the opportunity given for them to practice reading, writing and revision. This not only reinforces the fact that the participants welcomed guidelines which helped them understand L2 discourse conventions, but also seems to strengthen my conclusion that increased feedback-independence is a likely outcome of instruction which specifically focuses on drawing the attention of skilled writers using L2 to target language discourse conventions. In addition to this, the fact that the participants made no spontaneous reference to the benefits of reading, writing and revision practice alone raises serious doubts about the validity of Raimes' (1987) suggestion that what these writers need most is simply further practice in writing process strategies (c.f. chapter two).

The discourse-oriented pedagogy tested therefore not only produced encouraging results in terms of its effects upon readability and feedback-independence, but also, from the analysis of the retrospective questionnaires, it appears that it scored high in terms of overall face validity. Unlike what skilled writers using L2 might think of process-oriented instruction, i.e., that it is redundant insofar as it teaches skills they already possess, the

present discourse-oriented instruction seems to have generated among the participants a general feeling of relevance, satisfaction and immediacy: they felt most aspects of the course contributed "a lot" to their learning, that learning about L2 discourse conventions facilitated more than constrained writing processes, and that, on the basis of what they had learned, in the future they would be better able to improve their texts on their own.

It is obvious, however, that like in all comparative educational experiments, the present results cannot, with confidence, be generalized to other teaching situations. This is even more so in view of the fact that in this study it was only possible to work with a very limited sample from a population of intermediate to high-proficiency skilled writers using L2, and that it was not possible to work with a control group. In the future, the present discourse-oriented approach to second language writing instruction therefore has to be tested again, and other second language writing pedagogies need be scrutinized in the light of research questions similar to the ones which motivated the present study. Still, it goes without saying that the present approach is likely to offer more than traditional product-oriented writing instruction, for the latter is known to have failed to address readability. In addition to this, while the present approach is likely to help learners rely less on external cues from the writing

teacher, to the present date there is yet no evidence that process-oriented approaches promote any increase in feedback-independence. The present attempt to study the effects of a discourse-oriented second language programme upon the ability of skilled writers to improve their written production therefore seems to have been genuinely worthwhile.

8.2 Implications for teaching

The urgency I expressed in developing writing pedagogies for skilled writers using L2 has meant that the present study greatly emphasised the expediency of practice. In this final section I will therefore go over a number of implications for teaching which are rooted on what the present study enabled me to learn about writing instruction for intermediate to high-proficiency skilled writers using L2.

To begin with, the effects of the discourse-oriented instruction provided upon readability and feedback-independence plus the participants' reactions to this type of instruction make me insist on the following two general recommendations:

a. Skilled writers of intermediate to high second language proficiency will benefit from second language writing instruction which focuses on making them aware of how L2 discourse is organized.

b. Because skilled writers using L2 are already skilled writers, the exercises in the classroom need not emphasize the development of writing process strategies.

As originally intended, the present study also enabled me to understand much more about the kind of instruction skilled writers using L2 might benefit from. Therefore, I now wish to make some further, more specific recommendations regarding what instruction for skilled writers using L2 should focus on. Because these recommendations were not actually tested in the course of this study - they were however derived from what it enabled me to learn - I cannot overly stress that my objective is not so much to invite indiscriminate acceptance, but to call attention to the need for them to be submitted to future investigation. I will begin by making a few suggestions on how to teach, after which I will discuss what to teach.

I. HOW TO TEACH

To begin with, opting for the use of authentic materials seems to play an important role in ensuring ideal conditions for learning. For Smith (1982), learning takes place when there is "engagement" on the part of the learner at the time a "demonstration" of how something is done takes place. In the present study, the fact that the majority of the "demonstrations" in the course handouts were based on texts the participants themselves had written combined with the fact that the "demonstrations" regarding how native speakers normally organize discourse came from NS texts the participants themselves had selected seems to have automatically triggered their "engagement".

Also, when teaching about L2 discourse conventions, it seems important to make sure that they are introduced in a very gradual way. Otherwise, learners may find themselves overburdened by their own conscious efforts to incorporate those conventions. In the present study, at first the participants were only required to pay attention to one convention at a time (each time a new handout was presented), as opposed to all at once, to apply the conventions to texts they and their colleagues had already written (T1 and T2), as opposed to completely new texts (T4, T5 and T6), and with the aid of peer-feedback (T1 and T2), as opposed to completely on their own (T3). In the end, however, they seem to have been able to apply the globality of what they had learned both when writing (T4,

T5 and T6) and revising (T3) on their own, without feeling overburdened by the enormous amount of information regarding L2 conventions to which they had been exposed.

Another suggestion regarding how to teach is that it seems important to discuss the problems writers encounter in an **explicit** way. This recommendation is by no means novel. It is grounded on the Vygotskian thesis that conscious learning promotes development plus the interface position with respect to SLA adopted by Sharwood-Smith (1981). In the present study, it was seen that the revision changes related to what had been explicitly mentioned and explained in the classroom contributed more towards improved readability and increased feedback-independence than the revision changes indirectly related to the instruction provided. Krashen and Terrel's (1983) opposing view, i.e., that it is comprehensible input alone that contributes to second language acquisition, therefore seems less valid insofar as writing is concerned. Explicitness in the second language writing class can be said to help more than hinder inasmuch as writing "involves conscious operations [that] can be carried out at a far slower rate of processing than is possible in oral speech, and one can go over the product several times" (Luria 1982:166).

Finally, practising revision in pairs seems to be highly desirable too. As mentioned in chapter three, the participants had commented that it was easier to perceive

discoursal discrepancies in the texts by their peers because in those cases it was easier to decentre from subject-matter and pay more attention to language alone. Thus while the author benefited from being told what was discrepant in his text, his partner benefited from being given the opportunity to evaluate language separately from content. The present recommendation on the benefits of practising revision in pairs is again not particularly novel. It is in accordance with Jacobs' (1989) suggestion that revising with the help of peer-feedback - without the interference of the teacher - is an important step towards learning how to revise in the absence of feedback, and with Bartlett's (1982) claims on the advantages of working in pairs given that learners are less able to spot their own errors than errors by their peers.

II. WHAT TO TEACH

The first suggestion regarding what to teach I wish to make is that analysing revision seems to be more basic to understanding L2 writers' needs than analysing the ways in which their end-products violate L2 conventions. Writing products only tell us which parts of text are good and which are bad, but tell us little about the language-specific difficulties that writers encounter during the process of writing. The analysis of revision, however, is able to offer insights into what such difficulties might

be, for it tells us whether the standards the writer applied in order to evaluate his emerging text in the absence of feedback were good or bad. That is to say, while writing products tell us only whether the result of the decisions writers were forced to make during the process of writing were good or bad, the analysis of revision enables one to access information regarding whether the decisions themselves were good or bad. Although there might often be a very close correspondence between the two, i.e., good decisions lead to good end-products and bad decisions lead to bad end-products, this is not always the case. A writer's (good) decision to rewrite what he perceived could be improved in his emerging text does not mean he will actually be able to generate a better final product: he may well be unable to rewrite his text in a better way. Similarly, a writer's (bad) decision to reject what was already appropriate in his emerging text does not necessarily mean that his final product will be worse: he may simply replace an appropriate element with another equally appropriate one.

The above does not imply that I am revoking the principles underlying my original conception of what instruction for intermediate to high-proficiency skilled writers using L2 should focus on. Understanding the ways in which the end-products of their writing violate L2 conventions is not irrelevant to the assessment of their needs. On the contrary, the present study has shown that this is probably

a good starting point. Understanding the language-specific difficulties encountered by these writers during the writing process, however, is a useful way of coming to a deeper understanding of problem-areas which both are and are not visible in writing products.

In the analysis of revision according to the taxonomy of qualification categories utilized in this study, the positive and consequential changes tell us not only that the writer made good decisions during the process of rewriting, but also that the outcome of those decisions was satisfactory. In other words, the standards with which the writer evaluated his emerging text were probably good, and he was able to apply those standards in a fully or partly successful way. The positive and consequential changes therefore probably tell us that the writer faced few or no language-specific difficulties during the process of rewriting. It is therefore on the revision changes qualified according to the remaining qualification categories that an analysis of writers' needs should concentrate.

The indeterminate changes simply tell us that teachers and learners must get together in order to discuss what the latter had in mind so as to find out whether or not those changes were positive or consequential, and hence whether or not the learners in question need help in those respects. The negative, unnecessary and necessary changes

tell us that the writer lacked standards with which to evaluate his emerging text inasmuch as he rejected appropriate or more appropriate elements in text and accepted inappropriate or less appropriate ones. Of these, the negative and unnecessary changes tell us that the writer was at least concerned with evaluating parts of his emerging text, even though the standards he applied were, in the case of the former, detrimental to the final product, and, in the case of the latter, probably deleterious to the overall revision process. The necessary changes, however, point towards where the writer's most basic difficulties lay, for they indicate that either the writer avoided revising, or that he was not even able to locate points in text which needed revision. In other words, necessary changes indicate that the writer accepted inappropriate elements in text without even realizing it, or at least without attempting to replace them with more appropriate ones. The ineffective changes, in turn, tell us that the writer already acquired some standards with which to evaluate his emerging text of insofar as he rightfully rejected what was not appropriate. He needs however to further develop his understanding of those standards so as to be able to replace the inappropriate elements he rejected with more appropriate ones.

To summarize, the analysis of revision according to the qualification categories of the system proposed enables one to identify many of the product-related difficulties that

writers encounter during the process of writing, some of which are not visible in their writing products. The analysis also enables one to grade such difficulties into three different levels: the necessary changes point towards the most acute of these difficulties, for they indicate that the writer either avoided dealing with or was totally unaware of certain problems in his text; the negative and unnecessary changes, in turn, indicate that the route towards proficiency is likely to be shorter, for at least the writer was consciously trying to improve his emerging text; the ineffective changes, in turn, indicate that second language development is probably well on its way, for they tell us that the writer has acquired some standards with which to reject inappropriate parts of text, even though he was unable to retrieve more appropriate linguistic resources with which to replace what he correctly perceived should have been rejected³.

The next suggestion I wish to make is that, as pointed out in chapter six, cross-references between the learning-insufficient observations and the categories for describing the revision of reading process and writing product can be especially useful when it comes to identifying the domains of reading process and writing product to which special attention must be given⁴. The participants who took part in the present study, for example, seem to be in particular need of further instruction which focuses on accuracy, for which the learning-insufficient observations were

significantly more frequent than the learning-sufficient ones. To determine then what exactly it is they need to learn in order to produce more accurate texts, the learning-insufficient observations pertaining to accuracy must be accessed from the viewpoint of writing product. In chapter six it was seen that the majority of learning-insufficient observations pertaining to accuracy had to do with linguistic form. Should these LIO in accuracy/linguistic form be mainly those which involve determiners, then instruction should give special emphasis to the use of determiners. If however those learning-insufficient observations pertaining to accuracy make cross-references with a whole series of different sub-categories of linguistic form, then it is more likely that what the learners need is a general course on English grammar.

It is obvious that future instruction should not focus exclusively on the reading process and writing product domains for which the learning-insufficient observations are more frequent than the learning-sufficient ones. After all, determining whether or not feedback-independence has increased has nothing to do with the amount of feedback that is still needed. It may for example be the case that learners whose feedback-independence in terms of coherence has increased still have a lot to learn about coherence in L2 before they can do without feedback. If this is so, then cross-references between the learning-insufficient

observations pertaining to coherence and the writing product categories should serve to identify what exactly it is that future instruction must address if it is to help learners ensure their texts cohere more. If the learning-insufficient observations pertaining to coherence relate back to a wide range of different writing product categories, then it is likely that what the learners need is a course which gives special emphasis to the variety of ways in which coherence can be conveyed to the reader. However, if those learning-insufficient observations are mainly those which involve sentence adverbials, then instruction should give special emphasis to the use of sentence adverbials. If the difficulties writers encounter with the use of sentence adverbials affect more than just coherence, instruction which focuses on sentence adverbials may consequently have a positive effect on other components of the reading process as well.

Thus to summarize, I am suggesting that instruction for skilled writers using L2 which focuses on the problems they encounter during the process of writing can be more efficient than instruction which only addresses the problems which are visible in their writing products. The writing process difficulties I am referring to are not so much typical writing process difficulties, i.e., those which originate from inadequate planning, writing and revising skills, but language-specific difficulties grounded on the fact that L2 writers sometimes lack

standards to evaluate their emerging texts, or lack the linguistic resources necessary to apply those standards successfully. Analysing revision can help identifying many of the language-specific difficulties that writers encounter during the process of writing, and examining those difficulties from the dual perspective of reading process and writing product can help selecting the right focus for future instruction.

Notes to chapter eight

1. To encourage the participants to respond truthfully, they were explicitly asked not to write down their names on the questionnaire; the analysis is based on the responses by only seven of the eight participants because one of the participants was unable to attend the end-of-course session in which the questionnaire was given.

2. In section 2.4 I argued that an awareness of L2 discourse conventions was not likely to constrain writing processes given that writing-as-activity is something which takes place over time. This means that, unlike speakers, writers need not juggle with the possible constraints imposed by such an awareness at the moment of production; they can go over the product several times and use the permanent quality of written language to their advantage in order to rethink and revise their initial drafts in the light of L2 conventions. Luria (1982) has similar views on the matter.

3. At this point it seems once more appropriate to refer to Kellerman's (1983;1987) U-shaped behaviour second language acquisition thesis. Necessary changes seem to be related to Stage One inasmuch as they suggest that learners are unaware of certain differences between L1 and L2 which could lead to error. Negative and unnecessary changes seem to be related to Stage Two insofar as they suggest that learners are predicting that there are more differences than there actually are between L1 and L2, the result of which can lead to the rejection of appropriate or more appropriate forms. Ineffective changes seem to mark the beginning of the ascent towards Stage Three, for learners are starting to make predictions which are based on L2 standards, even though performance is not as yet target-like.

4. In the present study, only the negative, ineffective, unnecessary, necessary changes were considered to be signs of insufficient learning. However, had it been possible to recover information outside the revisions about subject-matter and intended meanings, the indeterminate changes could also be sorted out according to whether or not they were learning-insufficient. In analysing writers' needs, whenever possible, one should strive to sort out in this way the changes initially qualified as indeterminate.