

1 Writing and teaching writing

Aims: This chapter will explore some of the ways that writing is viewed and the implications this has for teaching. It outlines the kinds of knowledge and skills involved in writing and develops some general principles for L2 writing teaching through a critical analysis of the main classroom orientations.

As EFL/ESL writing teachers, our main activities involve conceptualizing, planning, and delivering courses. At first sight, this seems to be mainly an application of practical professional knowledge, gained through hands-on classroom experience. To some extent this is true of course, for like any craft, teaching improves with practice. But there is more to it than this. Experience can only be a part of the picture, as our classroom decisions are always informed by our theories and beliefs about what writing is and how people learn to write. Everything we do in the classroom, the methods and materials we adopt, the teaching styles we assume, the tasks we assign, are guided by both practical and theoretical knowledge, and our decisions can be more effective if that knowledge is explicit. A familiarity with what is known about writing, and about teaching writing, can therefore help us to reflect on our assumptions and enable us to approach current teaching methods with an informed and critical eye.

This chapter provides an overview of how different conceptions of writing and learning influence teaching practices in L2 classrooms. For clarity I will present these conceptions under different headings, but it would be wrong to understand them as core dichotomies. The approaches discussed represent available options which can be translated into classroom practices in many different ways and combinations. Together they offer a picture of current L2 writing instruction.

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Reflection 1.1

Spend a few minutes to reflect on your own experiences as a writing teacher. (a) What are the most important things you want students to learn from your classes? (b) What kinds of activities do you use? (c) Do you think an understanding of different ideas about writing and teaching could help you to become a better teacher? (d) Why?

Guiding concepts in L2 writing teaching

A number of theories supporting teachers' efforts to understand L2 writing and learning have developed since EFL/ESL writing first emerged as a distinctive area of scholarship in the 1980s. In most cases each has been enthusiastically taken up, translated into appropriate methodologies, and put to work in classrooms. Yet each also has typically been seen as another piece in the jigsaw, an additional perspective to illuminate what learners need to learn and what teachers need to provide for effective writing instruction. So, while often treated as historically evolving movements (e.g., Raimes, 1991), it would be wrong to see each theory growing out of and replacing the last. They are more accurately seen as complementary and overlapping perspectives, representing potentially compatible means of understanding the complex reality of writing. It is helpful therefore to understand these theories as curriculum options, each organizing L2 writing teaching around a different focus:

- language structures
- text functions
- themes or topics
- creative expression
- composing processes
- content
- genre and contexts of writing

Few teachers adopt and strictly follow just one of these orientations in their classrooms. Instead, they tend to adopt an eclectic range of methods that represent several perspectives, accommodating their practices to the constraints of their teaching situations and their beliefs about how students learn to write. But although the “pure” application of a particular theory is quite rare, it is common for one to predominate in how teachers conceptualize their work and organize what they do in their classrooms (Cumming, 2003).

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Teachers therefore tend to recognize and draw on a number of approaches but typically show a preference for one of them. So, even though they rarely constitute distinct classroom approaches, it is helpful to examine each conception separately to discover more clearly what each tells us about writing and how it can support our teaching.

Reflection 1.2

Which of the curriculum orientations previously listed are you most familiar with? Can you identify one that best fits your own experience of teaching or learning to write in a second language? Might some orientations be more appropriate for some teaching-learning situations than others?

Focus on language structures

One way to look at writing is to see it as marks on a page or a screen, a coherent arrangement of words, clauses, and sentences, structured according to a system of rules. Conceptualizing L2 writing in this way directs attention to writing as a product and encourages a focus on formal text units or grammatical features of texts. In this view, learning to write in a foreign or second language mainly involves linguistic knowledge and the vocabulary choices, syntactic patterns, and cohesive devices that comprise the essential building blocks of texts.

This orientation was born from the marriage of structural linguistics and the behaviorist learning theories of second language teaching that were dominant in the 1960s (Silva, 1990). Essentially, writing is seen as a product constructed from the writer's command of grammatical and lexical knowledge, and writing development is considered to be the result of imitating and manipulating models provided by the teacher. For many who adopt this view, writing is regarded as an extension of grammar – a means of reinforcing language patterns through habit formation and testing learners' ability to produce well-formed sentences. For others, writing is an intricate structure that can only be learned by developing the ability to manipulate lexis and grammar.

An emphasis on language structure as a basis for writing teaching is typically a four-stage process:

1. **Familiarization:** Learners are taught certain grammar and vocabulary, usually through a text.

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Table 1.1: A substitution table

There are	Y	types kinds classes	of X	: A, B, and C. . These are A, B, and C. are A, B, and C.
The		categories		
X	Consists of	Y	categories	. These are A, B, and C.
	Can be divided into classes		kinds types	: A, B, and C.
A, B, and C are	kinds types categories	of X.		

Source: Hamp-Lyons and Heasley, 1987: 23

2. **Controlled writing:** Learners manipulate fixed patterns, often from substitution tables.
3. **Guided writing:** Learners imitate model texts.
4. **Free writing:** Learners use the patterns they have developed to write an essay, letter, and so forth.

Texts are often regarded as a series of appropriate grammatical structures, and so instruction may employ “slot and filler” frameworks in which sentences with different meanings can be generated by varying the words in the slots. Writing is rigidly controlled through guided compositions where learners are given short texts and asked to fill in gaps, complete sentences, transform tenses or personal pronouns, and complete other exercises that focus students on achieving accuracy and avoiding errors. A common application of this is the substitution table (Table 1.1) which provides models for students and allows them to generate risk-free sentences.

The structural orientation thus emphasizes writing as combinations of lexical and syntactic forms and good writing as the demonstration of knowledge of these forms and of the rules used to create texts. Accuracy and clear exposition are considered the main criteria of good writing, while the actual communicative content, the *meaning*, is left to be dealt with later. Teaching writing predominantly involves developing learners’ skills in producing fixed patterns, and responding to writing means identifying and correcting problems in the student’s control of the language system. Many of these techniques are widely used today in writing classes at lower levels of language proficiency for building vocabulary, scaffolding writing development, and increasing the confidence of novice writers.

Reflection 1.3

Consider your own writing teaching practices or your experiences of writing as a student. Do they include elements of approaches that emphasize language structures? Can such approaches be effective in developing writing? In what situations might they be a useful response to student needs?

Although many L2 students learn to write in this way, a structural orientation can create serious problems. One drawback is that formal patterns are often presented as short fragments which tend to be based on the intuitions of materials writers rather than the analyses of real texts. This not only hinders students from developing their writing beyond a few sentences, but can also mislead or confuse them when they have to write in other situations. Nor is it easy to see how a focus restricted to grammar can lead to better writing. Research has tried to measure students' writing improvement through their increased use of formal features such as relative clauses or the "syntactic complexity" of their texts (e.g., Hunt, 1983). Syntactic complexity and grammatical accuracy, however, are not the only features of writing improvement and may not even be the best measures of good writing. Most teachers are familiar with students who can construct accurate sentences and yet are unable to produce appropriate written texts, while fewer errors in an essay may simply reveal a reluctance to take risks, rather than indicate progress.

More seriously, the goal of writing instruction can never be just training in explicitness and accuracy because written texts are always a response to a particular communicative setting. No feature can be a universal marker of good writing because good writing is always contextually variable. Writers always draw on their knowledge of their readers and similar texts to decide both what to say and how to say it, aware that different forms express different relationships and meanings. Conversely, readers always draw on their linguistic and contextual assumptions to recover these meanings from texts, and this is confirmed in the large literature on knowledge-based inferencing in reading comprehension (e.g., Barnett, 1989).

For these reasons, few L2 writing teachers now see writing *only* as surface forms. But it is equally unhelpful to see language as irrelevant to learning to write. Control over surface features is crucial, and students need an understanding of how words, sentences, and larger discourse structures can shape and express the meanings they want to convey. Most teachers therefore include formal elements in their courses, but they also look beyond language

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structures to ensure that students don't just know how to write grammatically correct texts, but also how to apply this knowledge for particular purposes and contexts.

Reflection 1.4

Can you imagine any circumstances when you might focus on language structures in a writing class? Are there ways you might be able to adapt this focus to help students express their meanings?

Focus on text functions

While L2 students obviously need an understanding of appropriate grammar and vocabulary when learning to write in English, writing is obviously not *only* these things. If language structures are to be part of a writing course, then we need principled reasons for choosing which patterns to teach and how they can be used effectively. An important principle here is to relate structures to meanings, making language *use* a criteria for teaching materials. This introduces the idea that particular language *forms* perform certain communicative *functions* and that students can be taught the functions most relevant to their needs. Functions are the *means* for achieving the *ends* (or purposes) of writing. This orientation is sometimes labeled “current-traditional rhetoric” or simply a “functional approach” and is influential where L2 students are being prepared for academic writing at college or university.

One aim of this focus is to help students develop effective paragraphs through the creation of topic sentences, supporting sentences, and transitions, and to develop different types of paragraphs. Students are guided to produce connected sentences according to prescribed formulas and tasks which tend to focus on form to positively reinforce model writing patterns. As with sentence-level activities, composing tasks often include so-called free writing methods, which largely involve learners reordering sentences in scrambled paragraphs, selecting appropriate sentences to complete gapped paragraphs and write paragraphs from provided information.

Clearly, this orientation is heavily influenced by the structural model described above, as paragraphs are seen almost as syntactic units like sentences, in which writers can fit particular functional units into given slots. From this it is a short step to apply the same principles to entire essays. Texts can then be seen as composed of structural entities such as

Unit 1	Structure and cohesion
Unit 2	Description: Process and procedure
Unit 3	Description: Physical
Unit 4	Narrative
Unit 5	Definitions
Unit 6	Exemplification
Unit 7	Classification
Unit 8	Comparison and contrast
Unit 9	Cause and effect
Unit 10	Generalization, qualification, and certainty
Unit 11	Interpretation of data
Unit 12	Discussion
Unit 13	Drawing conclusions
Unit 14	Reports: studies and research
Unit 15	Surveys and questionnaires

Source: Adapted from Jordan, 1990.

Figure 1.1: A contents page from a functionally oriented textbook.

Introduction-Body-Conclusion, and particular organizational patterns such as narration, description, and exposition are described and taught. Typically, courses are organized according to common functions of written English, such as the example from a popular academic writing textbook shown in Figure 1.1.

Each unit typically contains comprehension checks on a model text. These are followed by exercises that draw attention to the language used to express the target function and that develop students' abilities to use them in their writing. Such tasks include developing an outline into an essay, or imitating the patterns of a parallel text in their own essay. Again, these offer good scaffolding for writing by supporting L2 learners' development. An example is shown in Figure 1.2.

While meaning is involved in these tasks and instructional strategies, they are essentially concerned with disembodied patterns rather than writing activities that have any meaning or purpose for students. An exclusive focus on form or function means that writing is detached from the practical purposes and personal experiences of the writer. Methods such as guided compositions are based on the assumption that texts are objects that can be taught independently of particular contexts, writers, or readers, and that by following certain rules, writers can fully represent their intended meanings. Writing, however, is more than a matter of arranging elements in the best order, and writing instruction is more than assisting learners to remember and execute these patterns. An awareness of this has led teachers to make efforts to introduce the writer into their models of writing and writing teaching,

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There are basically two main ways to organise a cause and effect essay: “block” organization and “chain” organization. In *block organization*, you first discuss all of the causes as a block (in one, two, three or more paragraphs, depending on the number of causes). Then you discuss all of the effects together as a block. In *chain organization*, you discuss a first cause and its effect, a second cause and its effect, a third cause and its effect. Usually, each new cause is the result of the preceding effect. Discussion of each new cause and its effect begins with a new paragraph. All the paragraphs are linked in a “chain.”

BLOCK	CHAIN
Introduction	Introduction
First cause	First cause
Second cause	Effect
Transition paragraph	Second Cause
First effect	Effect
Second effect	Third Cause
Third effect	Effect
Conclusion	Conclusion

Source: Adapted from Oshima and Hogue, 1999: 130–1.

Figure 1.2: A paragraph organization description.

and it is to orientations that highlight writers to which we turn in the next section.

Reflection 1.5

What arguments would persuade you to adopt a Functional orientation to your teaching?

Focus on creative expression

The third teaching orientation takes the writer, rather than form, as the point of departure. Following L1 composition theorists such as Elbow (1998) and Murray (1985), many writing teachers from liberal arts backgrounds see their classroom goals as fostering L2 students’ expressive abilities, encouraging them to find their own voices to produce writing that is fresh and spontaneous. These classrooms are organized around students’ personal experiences and opinions, and writing is considered a creative act of self-discovery. This can help generate self-awareness of the writer’s social position and literate possibilities (Friere, 1974) as well as facilitate “clear thinking, effective relating, and satisfying self-expression” (Moffett,

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1982: 235). A writing teacher in Japan characterized his approach like this:

I try to challenge the students to be creative in expressing themselves. Students learn to express their feelings and opinions so that others can understand what they think and like to do. I've heard that prospective employers sometimes ask students what they have learned at university, and that some students have showed them their poems. [quoted in Cumming, 2003]

Reflection 1.6

Can you recall an experience when you wrote a creative text, perhaps a poem or short story? Do you feel that this was helpful in developing your skills as a writer more generally? In what ways?

From this perspective, writing is learned, not taught, so writing instruction is nondirective and personal. Writing is a way of sharing personal meanings and writing courses emphasize the power of the individual to construct his or her own views on a topic. Teachers see their role as simply to provide students with the space to make their own meanings within a positive and cooperative environment. Because writing is a developmental process, they try to avoid imposing their views, offering models, or suggesting responses to topics beforehand. Instead, they seek to stimulate the writer's ideas through pre-writing tasks, such as journal writing and parallel texts. Because writing is an act of discovering meaning, a willingness to engage with students' assertions is crucial, and response is a central means to initiate and guide ideas (e.g., Straub, 2000). This orientation further urges teachers to respond to the ideas that learners produce, rather than dwell on formal errors (Murray, 1985). Students have considerable opportunities for writing and exercises may attend to features such as style, wordiness, clichés, active versus passive voice, and so on. In contrast to the rigid practice of a more form-oriented approach, writers are urged to be creative and to take chances through free writing.

Figure 1.3 shows typical writing rubrics in this approach. Both rubrics ask students to read personal writing extracts, respond to them as readers, and then to use them as a stimulus to write about their own experiences.

Expressivism is an important approach as it encourages writers to explore their beliefs, engage with the ideas of others, and connect with readers. Yet it leans heavily on an asocial view of the writer, and its ideology of individualism may disadvantage second language students from cultures that place a different value on self-expression (see Chapter 2). In addition,

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In his article, Green tells us that Bob Love was saved because “some kind and caring people” helped him to get speech therapy. Is there any example of “kind and caring people” you have witnessed in your life or in the lives of those around you? Tell who these people are and exactly what they did that showed their kindness.

Violet’s aunt died for her country even though she never wore a uniform or fired a bullet. Write about what values or people you would sacrifice your life for if you were pushed to do so.

Figure 1.3: Essay topics from an expressivist textbook.

it is difficult to extract from the approach any clear principles from which to teach and evaluate “good writing.” It simply assumes that all writers have a similar innate creative potential and can learn to express themselves through writing if their originality and spontaneity are allowed to flourish. Writing is seen as springing from self-discovery guided by writing on topics of potential interest to writers and, as a result, the approach is likely to be most successful in the hands of teachers who themselves write creatively. Murray’s (1985) *A writer teaches writing*, for instance, provides a good account of expressivist methods, but also suggests the importance of the teacher’s own personal insights in the process.

So despite its influence in L1 writing classrooms, expressivism has been treated cautiously in L2 contexts. Although many L2 students have learned successfully through this approach, others may experience difficulties, as it tends to neglect the cultural backgrounds of learners, the social consequences of writing, and the purposes of communication in the real world, where writing matters.

Focus on the writing process

Like the expressive orientation, the process approach to writing teaching emphasizes the writer as an independent producer of texts, but it goes further to address the issue of what teachers should do to help learners perform a writing task. The numerous incarnations of this perspective are consistent in recognizing basic cognitive processes as central to writing activity and in stressing the need to develop students’ abilities to plan, define a rhetorical problem, and propose and evaluate solutions.

Reflection 1.7

What cognitive skills might be involved in the writing process? What methods may help students to develop their abilities to carry out a writing task?
