

## CHAPTER ONE

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# Introduction

The ability to write effectively is becoming increasingly important in our global community, and instruction in writing is thus assuming an increasing role in both second- and foreign-language education. As advances in transportation and technology allow people from nations and cultures throughout the world to interact with each other, communication across languages becomes ever more essential. As a result, the ability to speak and write a second language is becoming widely recognized as an important skill for educational, business, and personal reasons. Writing has also become more important as tenets of communicative language teaching – that is, teaching language as a system of communication rather than as an object of study – have taken hold in both second- and foreign-language settings. The traditional view in language classes that writing functions primarily to support and reinforce patterns of oral language use, grammar, and vocabulary, is being supplanted by the notion that writing in a second language is a worthwhile enterprise in and of itself.

Wherever the acquisition of a specific language skill is seen as important, it becomes equally important to test that skill, and writing is no exception. Thus, as the role of writing in second-language education increases, there is an ever greater demand for valid and reliable ways to test writing ability, both for classroom use and as a predictor of future professional or academic success.

What does it mean to test writing ability? A common-sense answer to this question is that “the best way to test people’s writing ability is to get them to write” (Hughes, 1989: 75). If we agree with this

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statement, it follows that a test of writing involves at least two basic components: one or more writing tasks, or instructions that tell test takers what to write, and a means of evaluating the writing samples that test takers produce. However, as we shall see, designing a good test of writing involves much more than simply thinking of a topic for test takers to write about and then using our own judgement to rank order the resulting writing samples. Before we can make decisions about designing assessment tasks or scoring procedures, we need to consider a number of key questions. These questions include the following:

- What are we trying to test? That is, how are we defining writing ability for the purposes of the test – are we interested primarily in whether test takers can form grammatical sentences, or do we want to know how well they can use writing for a specific communicative function?
- Why do we want to test writing ability? What will we do with the information that we get from the test?
- Who are our test takers? What do we need to know about them in order to design tasks that allow test takers to perform at their highest ability?
- Who will score the tests, and what criteria or standards will be used? How can we ensure that raters apply the scoring standards consistently?
- Who will use the information that our test provides? In what form will the information be the most useful?
- What are the constraints (of time, materials, money, and labor) that limit the amount and kind of information we can collect about test takers' writing ability?
- What do we need to know about testing to make our test valid and reliable?

This book attempts to outline answers to these questions, and is organized in the following way. The rest of Chapter 1 provides an introduction to writing assessment by considering, first of all, the reasons why people use writing in second-language contexts, and second, the types of writing texts people are likely to need to write in a second language, both inside and outside the language classroom. The introduction is followed by an overview of writing assessment in

both first and second languages, comprising two chapters. Chapter 2, *The Nature of Writing Ability*, reviews literature from the fields of composition, applied linguistics, and psychology to discuss the nature of writing ability and the connections between writing and other language skills, particularly speaking and reading. Chapter 3, *Basic Considerations in Assessing Writing*, reviews the purposes for testing writing in a variety of settings for various populations, and discusses principles for evaluating test usefulness (Bachman and Palmer, 1996).

Chapters 4 through 7 deal with what has been traditionally called direct testing of writing, particularly for large-scale assessment: timed writing on a topic not known to test takers in advance. Chapter 4 reviews a large body of research on writing assessment, looking at writing tasks, rating scales, raters, and texts. Chapter 5 presents information and advice on designing tasks for writing assessment, and Chapter 6 discusses scoring procedures. Chapter 7 provides an in-depth discussion of a number of writing tests for a variety of contexts.

The final three chapters deal with topics in writing assessment that go beyond the traditional timed impromptu writing test. Chapter 8 discusses classroom evaluation of writing, looking at options for responding to and evaluating student writing at various stages of the writing process, from pre-writing through to a polished, final text. Chapter 9 discusses portfolio assessment, or the assessment of writing ability by collecting and evaluating a number of texts written at different times and for different audiences and purposes. Finally, Chapter 10 looks towards the future, discussing unresolved issues and future directions in second-language writing assessment.

## **Writing in first- and second-language contexts**

Before we can discuss how to test writing, we must start by attempting to define what we mean by **writing ability**. As we will see, however, this is not a simple task, since, as researchers in both first- and second-language writing have pointed out, the uses to which writing is put by different people in different situations are so varied that no single definition can cover all situations (Purves, 1992; Camp, 1993; White, 1995). For example, the ability to write down exactly what someone else says (an important skill for a stenographer) is quite different from the ability to write a persuasive argument. For

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second-language learners, learning to write may mean anything from attempting to master the most commonly used Chinese characters to being able to write a dissertation for a Ph.D. Instead of attempting an all-encompassing definition, then, it may be more useful to begin by delineating the situations in which people learn and use second languages in general and second-language writing in particular, and the types of writing that are likely to be relevant for second-language writers.

Perhaps the best way to begin to appreciate the complexities in L2 writing is to contrast it with L1 writing. As Vähäpääsi (1982), Leki (1992) and others have pointed out, first language writing is inextricably linked to formal education. While virtually all children are able to speak their native language when they begin school, writing must be explicitly taught. Furthermore, in comparison to speaking, listening, and reading, writing outside of school settings is relatively rare, and extensive public writing (that is, writing beyond the sentence or paragraph level and intended for an audience other than oneself or one's close associates) is reserved for those employed in specialized careers such as education, law, or journalism.

In first-language settings, the ability to write well has a very close relationship to academic and professional success. Grabowski (1996) notes that:

Writing, as compared to speaking, can be seen as a more standardized system which must be acquired through special instruction. Mastery of this standard system is an important prerequisite of cultural and educational participation and the maintenance of one's rights and duties . . . The fact that writing is more standardized than speaking allows for a higher degree of sanctions when people deviate from that standard.

(Grabowski, 1996: 75)

Thus, in first-language education, learning to write involves learning a specialized version of a language already known to students. This specialized language differs in important ways from spoken language, both in form and in use, as we shall see in Chapter 2, but builds upon linguistic resources that students already possess. The ultimate goal of learning to write is, for most students, to be able to participate fully in many aspects of society beyond school, and for some, to pursue careers that involve extensive writing.

The value of being able to write effectively increases as students progress through compulsory education on to higher education. At

the university level in particular, writing is seen not just as a standardized system of communication but also as an essential tool for learning. At least in the English-speaking world, one of the main functions of writing at higher levels of education is to expand one's own knowledge through reflection rather than simply to communicate information (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1987; Purves *et al.*, 1984). Writing and critical thinking are seen as closely linked, and expertise in writing is seen as an indication that students have mastered the cognitive skills required for university work. Or, to phrase it somewhat more negatively, a perceived lack of writing expertise is frequently seen as a sign that students do not possess the appropriate thinking and reasoning skills that they need to succeed. In first-language writing instruction, therefore, particularly in higher education, a great deal of emphasis is placed on originality of thought, the development of ideas, and the soundness of the writer's logic. Conventions of language (voice, tone, style, accuracy, mechanics) are important as well, but frequently these are seen as secondary matters, to be addressed after matters of content and organization.

While the specific goals of writing instruction may vary from culture to culture (see Saari and Purves, 1992, for an overview of mother-tongue and language education internationally), it is clear that writing is an important part of the curriculum in schools from the earliest grades onward, and that most children in countries that have a formal education system will learn to write, at least at a basic level, in that setting. In this sense, we can say that first language writing instruction is relatively standardized within a particular culture.

In contrast, the same cannot be said of second-language writing because of the wide variety of situations in which people learn and use second languages, both as children and as adults, in schools and in other settings. We can distinguish between at least five main groups of second-language learners, as shown in Table 1.1 (adapted from Bernhardt, 1991). The first group consists of children from a minority language group receiving their education in the majority language. These children need to learn to read and write in a language that is not spoken in their home in order to succeed in school and ultimately in the workplace. A second group of children are majority language speakers in immersion programs or otherwise learning a second language in school. In this case, mastery of the second language enhances their education but is not critical to ultimate

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Table 1.1 *Groups of second language learners (adapted from Bernhardt, 1991)*

|          | Learners  | Needs                                | Purpose  |
|----------|---|--------------------------------------|--|
| Children | minority group members; e.g. in bilingual programs                          | academic 'school' writing skills     | for survival   |
|          | majority group members; e.g. in immersion programs                          |                                      | for enhancement  |
| Adults   | minority group members, immigrant status                                    | immediate functional literacy skills | for survival in the workplace                          |
|          | quasi-temporary academic status   |                                      | for advanced subject matter degrees                    |
|          | majority language group members; e.g. traditional foreign-language learners | academic 'educated' language skills  | for educational and/or job enhancement and/or interest |

educational success, in contrast to the first group. A common factor for both groups of children is that their first language is still developing, and that, like first-language writers, writing is very much a school-based and school-oriented activity.

There are also three distinct groups of adult second-language learners. The first group consists of immigrants to a new country, who are frequently from a lower-prestige language background and may or may not be literate in their first language. For these learners, writing at a basic functional level is essential for survival in the workplace. In marked contrast to this group is a second group of adults: those who have left their home countries to seek an advanced university degree. These adults are already highly educated and literate in their first language, and their writing needs are very sophisticated. Finally, there is a third group of L2 learners: majority language group members who are learning a second language for personal interest and/or career or educational enhancement. Like the second group, this third group is generally well educated; unlike the second group, however, they may not have as great a need to write in their second language, and

certainly the writing that they will do is less complex and demanding than that of the second group.

To summarize, then, groups of second-language learners can be distinguished by age, by level of education and first-language literacy, and by the real-world need for writing outside of the classroom. In addition to these factors, the ability and opportunity to write in a second language are also determined by other considerations. One important factor is the stage or level of acquisition of the second language. This factor will be discussed in detail in Chapter 2; for the present, we will simply note that one cannot write in a second language without knowing at least something about the grammar and vocabulary of that language. An additional factor is the relative similarity or difference between the two languages: writing in a language that is closely related to one's native language in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and writing system is clearly easier than writing in a language that is vastly different. Finally, an important consideration, which is related to the real-world need for writing discussed above, is the role of the second language as a language of wider communication: someone learning English as a foreign language will probably have more realistic needs for writing in that language than someone learning Russian, for example.

As this discussion has shown, then, the differences between first- and second-language writing are considerable, and in particular the variety of backgrounds, experience, needs, and purposes for writing is much greater for second-language writers than for first-language writers. As we shall see later on in this book, this variety has important implications for the testing of writing, both in terms of designing appropriate writing tasks and in terms of evaluating writing.

### **Classification of written text types**

One important implication of the variety of background, experience, and needs of second-language writers is that the types of writing produced by these different groups vary considerably as well. To continue our discussion of what is meant by writing ability, then, we will now turn to another question: What do people write, and under what circumstances? As discussed above, writing can be understood as meaning anything from forming letters to writing extended discourse. What kinds of writing are relevant for which groups of second-

Table 1.2 *General model of writing discourse (Vähäpääsi, 1982)*

|   | Cognitive Processing                | I REPRODUCE   | II ORGANIZE/REORGANIZE  | III INVENT/GENERATE  |
|---|-------------------------------------|---|---|--|
| Dominant Intention/Purpose                | Primary Content<br>Primary Audience | Linguistically precoded/<br>Predetermined Information | Spatial/<br>Temporal<br>Known<br>Phenomena,<br>Concepts or<br>Mental States   | Spatial/<br>Temporal<br>New or Alternative<br>Phenomena,<br>Concepts or<br>Mental States                                       |
| 1. To learn (metalingual mathetic)        | Self                                | Copying<br>Taking dictation                           | Retell a story (heard or read)<br>Note<br>Resume<br>Summary<br>Outline<br>Paraphrasing  | Comments on book margins<br>Metaphors<br>Analogies   |
| 2. To convey emotions, feelings (emotive) | Self<br>Others                      | Stream of consciousness                               | Personal story<br>Personal diary<br>Personal letter   | Reflective writing<br>– Personal essays<br><br>The traditional literary genre  |
| 3. To inform (referential)                | Others                              | Quote<br>Fill in a form                               | Narrative report<br>News<br>Instruction<br>Telegram<br>Announcement<br>Circular<br>Directions<br>Description<br>Technical description<br>Biography<br>Science report/<br>experiment | Expository writing<br>– Definition<br>– Academic essay/article<br>– Book review<br>– Commentary<br><br>and modes can be placed |



|   |                         |                                |  |  |   |                         |
|---|-------------------------|--------------------------------|--|--|---|-------------------------|
| 4. To convince, persuade (conative)       | Others                  | Citation from authority/expert | Letter of application<br>Statement of personal views, opinions         | Advertisement<br>Letter or advice<br>Statement of personal views, opinions | Argumentative/persuasive writing<br>– Editorial<br>– Critical essay/article | under one or more       |
| 5. To entertain, delight, please (poetic) | Others                  | Quotation of poetry and prose  | Given an ending – create a story<br>Create an ending<br>Retell a story | Word portrait or sketch<br>Cause/rle                                       | Entertainment writing<br>– Parody<br>– Rhymes                               | of these four purposes. |
| 6. To keep in touch (phatic)              | Others                  | Postcards                      | Postcards, letters   |  |   |                         |
|   | DOCUMENTATIVE DISCOURSE |                                | REPORTORIAL DISCOURSE  |  | EXPLORATORY DISCOURSE   |                         |

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language writers? If we are going to have a generalized model of second language writing that covers all five groups of second-language writers, it is important to have a system for describing and categorizing writing text types in terms of their most important characteristics.

One useful model of writing discourse was originally laid out by Vähäpääsi (1982) for an international study of school writing. This model is reproduced here as Table 1.2.

As the table shows, text types can be categorized along two major dimensions: cognitive processing, and dominant intention or purpose. Along the horizontal axis, three fundamental levels of cognitive processing can be distinguished. The least demanding task is to reproduce information that has already been linguistically encoded or determined (Type I). Examples of writing at this level would be taking dictation or filling in a form. The next level of cognitive processing, organizing, involves arranging or organizing information that is known to the writer (Type II). An example of this type of writing would be a laboratory report. Finally, the most demanding level of cognitive processing involves inventing or generating new ideas or information, as in expository writing (Type III). It is this third type of writing – writing for knowledge transforming – that is seen as most critical in academic writing for first-language writers, and for second-language writers in academic settings, as discussed above.

Along the vertical axis, Vähäpääsi lists six different dominant intentions or purposes, following a scheme originally proposed by Jakobson (1960). These purposes are to learn, to convey emotions, to inform, to convince or persuade, to entertain/delight, and to keep in touch. Note that, unlike the cognitive demands, there is no implied hierarchy among these purposes – that is, the ability to achieve one of these functions does not depend on the ability to do others, even though it may be argued that persuading is more difficult than informing, for example. Along with these purposes, there is also consideration of the primary audience, either self or others. Written texts can thus be placed into the grid created by the intersection of these two axes.

While this categorization was intended originally for school writing, it may be useful to return to the five groups of second-language writers described above and map their typical writing needs onto this grid (see Table 1.3). The first two groups – children being schooled in their second language – will need any or all of these writing types, depending on their level of schooling and the specific demands of the