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 conceptualising, 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.

> **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?

1.1 What is Second Language Writing?

Simply, second language writing is a term applied to writing done in a language other than the writer's native language(s). It is also often, but not always, being done in a language that the writer is in the process of learning. For many of us it is also an abstract *area of study* – the study of writing performed by non-native speakers. And, in addition, an area concerned with the *experience* of writing in another language, the *analysis* of the writing produced in another language, the *teaching* of writing in another language, and the *study of teaching* of writing in another language (Hyland, 2013). In other words, second language writing is not just something that people do, but also what they produce and how it is taught, analysed and learnt. How we look at it very much depends on what we want to do with it. This diversity of perspective embraces those in Teachers of English to Speakers of Others Languages (TESOL), applied linguistics, composition and translation as well as teachers working with particular language groups in a range of contexts. The way we understand the field of second language writing, however, really boils down to the shared sense we have of the issues that need to be addressed and what we agree to be the best ways of addressing them; and this means the field is forever changing.

It has to be admitted that the term 'second language' is itself ambiguous as it embraces both writing in any language other than the writer's 'native' language and writing done in contexts where the target language is dominant outside the classroom. 'Second language' in the phrase 'second language writing' overlaps with and includes writing in a third, fourth or foreign language. This points us to the fact that it isn't only the *writing* that is complex and interesting but also the *writers* themselves. Individuals who vary in terms of their backgrounds, their language proficiencies, their writing purposes, their previous experiences and their learning contexts. As Casanave (2012: 297) has noted:

> the field of L2 writing is as much about people who write (including ourselves) as it is about texts. People are idiosyncratic, all steeped in our own histories of L1 and L2 literacy and our own shifting contextualised practices.

Altogether, then, 'second language writing' is a tough term to pin down, but it is one we can approach through the ways it is, and has been, studied and taught.

1.2 Guiding Concepts in Teaching L2 Writing

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 1970s. 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. see Matsuda, 2003), 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 organising L2 writing teaching around a different focus:

• structural	• process
• functional	• content
• expressive	• genre

Few teachers strictly follow just one of these orientations in their classrooms. Instead, they tend to adopt an eclectic range of methods, 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. Teachers may therefore often 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?

1.3 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. Conceptualising L2 writing in this way directs attention to writing as a

product and encourages a focus on grammar and the formal units 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 learnt by developing the ability to manipulate lexis and grammar.

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

1. **Familiarisation**: learners are taught certain grammar and vocabulary, usually through close reading of a text.
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 acquired to write an essay, letter, etc.

Because texts are regarded as strings of grammatical structures, instruction may employ 'slot and filler' frameworks in which sentences with different meanings can be generated by varying the words in the grammar slots. A common application of this is the substitution table which scaffolds writing by providing students with mix-and-match model sentences to practise risk-free writing. Substitution tables are so ubiquitous in language teaching that the format was recently adopted to promote a cable TV company (Table 1.1.)

Writing is then done through guided compositions where learners are asked to fill in gaps, complete sentences, transform tenses or personal pronouns and complete other exercises in short texts. The aim is to focus students on achieving accuracy and avoiding errors.

TABLE 1.1 A substitution table

Lateness excuse generator

	eight	giant	slugs	in my way
Sorry I'm late there were	some	deadly	badgers	on the road
	about fifty	tiny	ostriches	in my cereal
	thousands	of rabid	wombles	in my trousers

(Tube advert for *Dave TV*, December 2017)

By emphasising writing as combinations of lexical and syntactic forms, students come to see good writing as the demonstration of knowledge of these forms and the rules behind them. Accuracy and clarity are the main criteria of good writing, while the actual communicative content, the *meaning*, is dealt with later, if at all. If teaching writing predominantly involves developing learners' skills in producing fixed patterns, then responding to writing means 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 students' confidence.

REFLECTION 1.3

Consider your own writing teaching practices or your experiences of writing as a student. Do they include elements of approaches that emphasise 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 real situations. Nor is it easy to see how a focus restricted to grammar can lead to better writing. Not only does this ignore the context and the relationship between the writer and the reader, but grammar turns out to be only a small component of what people see as good writing. Thus the key domains of writing within the National Curriculum in the UK, for example, reflect a focus on rhetorical skills, vocabulary, spelling, punctuation and handwriting as well as sentence structure and grammar. Grammatical accuracy is not the only feature 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 not indicate progress but simply show a reluctance to take risks.

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. 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. Nassaji, 2007).

For these reasons, very few L2 writing teachers now see writing *only* as good grammar. 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 help them express the meanings they want to convey. So while we need to include formal elements in our courses, we must also try to ensure that students know how to apply this grammatical knowledge for real purposes and in real contexts.

> **REFLECTION 1.4**
>
> Do you agree that language instruction is useful to L2 students in a writing course? What aspects of grammar would you include and how would you choose these features?

1.4 Focus on Text Functions

If writing is more than grammar, how do we choose which language patterns to teach? An important principle here is to relate structures to meanings, making language *use* a criterion 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 called a 'functional approach' and is influential where L2 students are being prepared for academic writing at college or university.

This approach to instruction focuses on broad text types and how language is used to get certain things done through writing, such as describing, narrating or reporting. This is achieved by assisting students to develop effective paragraphs to produce these types of texts, showing them how they might create topic sentences, supporting sentences and transitions in developing different types of paragraphs. Students are guided to produce connected sentences through tasks which tend to focus on form to positively reinforce model writing patterns. These tasks are often similar to the sentence-level activities described above, with learners reordering sentences in scrambled paragraphs, choosing sentences to complete gapped paragraphs and writing paragraphs from given information.

Clearly, this orientation is heavily influenced by the structural model, 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 be seen as composed of structural entities such as Introduction–Body–Conclusion. Thus courses may be organised around common functions of written English (e.g. Jordon, 1999) or be the focus of tasks, as in the example in Figure 1.1 from an EAP course.

Functions can also be expressed at both broader and smaller levels of writing, so that essays have functions such as 'problem-solution' or 'persuasion' and can be described in terms of the functional segments which construct them and the

Figure 1.1 Essay functions task from a university EAP course

Quickly skim extracts A–Q below and decide their main function. Some extracts may have more than one function.

1) Defining a term

2) Describing properties

3) Describing applications

4) Categorising

5) Exemplifying

6) Comparing and contrasting

7) Describing a process

8) Describing causality

9) Describing methods

10) Reporting research results

11) Introducing/Analysing a problem

12) Providing historical context

(Language Centre, University of Manchester)

language students may find useful in writing them. Figure 1.2, taken from the excellent EAP-foundation.com website, for instance, is part of a lesson on writing cause and effect essays. The webpage gives information on what this kind of essay is, how to structure it and how to use structure words and also provides an example. Here is the description of the functional structure of such essays and a writer's checklist.

Figure 1.2 A functional description of a cause and effect essay

There are two main ways to structure a cause and effect essay, namely using a *block* or a *chain* structure. For the *block* structure, all the causes are listed first, and all the effects are listed afterwards. For the *chain* structure, each cause is followed immediately by the effect. Usually that effect will then be the cause of the next effect, which is why this structure is called a 'chain'. Both types of structure have their merits. The former is generally clearer, especially for shorter essays, while the latter ensures that any effects you present relate directly to the causes you have given.

Block	Chain
Introduction	Introduction
Cause 1	Cause 1
Cause 2	and
Transition sentence/paragraph	Effect of Cause 1
Effect 1	Cause 2
Effect 2	and
Conclusion	Effect of Cause 2
	Cause 3
	and
	Effect of Cause 3
	Conclusion

Checklist

Below is a checklist for the main body of an essay. Use it to check your own writing, or get another student to help you.

Item	OK?	Comment
The essay is a cause and effect essay		
An appropriate structure is used, either block or chain		
Cause and effect structure words are used accurately		
The essay has a clear thesis statement		
Each paragraph has a clear topic sentence		
The essay has strong support (facts, reasons, examples)		
The conclusion includes a summary of the main points		

Source: www.eapfoundation.com/writing/essays/cande/

Information and tasks of this kind offer valuable scaffolding for learners, helping them to see the patterns in effective essay types. While important in providing novice writers with functional descriptions, they are like the focus on writing structures discussed above in being based on the assumption that texts are objects that can be taught independently of particular contexts, writers or readers, and that by following certain procedures, writers can fully represent their intended meanings. They are concerned with disembodied patterns rather than specific texts so that writing is detached from the practical purposes and personal experiences of the writer.

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 use these patterns. As a result, teachers now make efforts to consider the writer far more, and we turn to these orientations that highlight writers in the next section.

REFLECTION 1.5

Do you think a functional orientation is a useful way to teach L2 writing? What arguments would persuade you to adopt this approach?

1.5 Focus on Creative Expression

The third orientation takes the writer, rather than the text, as the point of departure. Following L1 composition theorists such as Elbow (1998) and Murray (2003), many writing teachers from liberal arts backgrounds see their classroom goals as fostering L2 students' expressive abilities, encouraging them to find their own voice and produce writing that is fresh and spontaneous. These classrooms are organised

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), be highly therapeutic by benefiting physical and psychological health (Pennebaker and Chung, 2011) and facilitate 'clear thinking, effective relating, and satisfying self-expression' (Moffett, 1982: 235). A writing teacher in Japan characterised 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 learnt, not taught, so writing instruction is non-directive and personal. Writing is a way of sharing personal meanings and writing courses emphasise 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 mind maps. 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. As Elbow argues:

> The main thing about freewriting is that it is *non-editing*. It is an exercise in bringing together the process of producing words and putting them down on the page. Practiced regularly, it undoes the ingrained habit of editing at the same time you are trying to produce. It will make writing less blocked because words will come more easily. (Elbow, 1973: 7)

Because writing is an act of discovering meaning, a willingness to engage with students' ideas is crucial, and response is a central means to initiate and guide these (e.g. Straub, 2000). This orientation further urges teachers to respond to the ideas that learners produce, rather than dwell on grammatical errors (Murray, 2003). Teachers give students considerable opportunities for writing and exercises

attend to features such as style, wordiness, clichés, active versus passive voice and so on.

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.

Figure 1.3 Example essay prompts

> Read the text and tell us what you think about Steve Jobs' legacy and what your own guiding principles are. What are your core beliefs? What would you say is your personal credo? How does that credo guide you in life?
>
> Tell us your reaction to this column. Do you see this family as 'sanctimonious showoffs,' or does their story move you to 'step off the treadmill of accumulation' and give more? What would you be willing to live without?

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, 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 (2003) *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 some L2 students may learn 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.

1.6 Focus on the Writing Process

Like the expressive orientation, the process approach to teaching writing emphasises 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. There are numerous versions of this perspective but all of them recognise that writing depends on basic cognitive processes and that teachers should develop these by helping students to plan, define a rhetorical problem, propose solutions and evaluate outcomes.