Second Language Writing
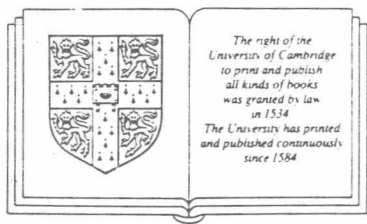
Research insights for the classroom

Edited by

Barbara Kroll

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Series editors' preface

Since the early 1970s, the nature of written discourse as well as the writing process itself have attracted renewed interest from educational researchers, linguists, applied linguists, and teachers. In the United Kingdom, for example, researchers such as Britton observed young writers in the process of writing in order to identify the planning, decision making, and heuristics they employed. Complementary work in the United States by such researchers and educators as Emig, Murray, and Graves led to the emergence of the "process" school in writing theory and practice. This view emphasizes that writing is a recursive rather than a linear process, that writers rarely write to a preconceived plan or model, that the process of writing creates its own form and meaning, and that there is a significant degree of individual variation in the composing behaviors of both first and second language writers.

While the enthusiasm that this view of writing generated has led some of its advocates to propose yet another pedagogical orthodoxy – the process approach – much remains to be discovered about how second language writers write and learn to write, and about the kinds of writing instruction they are most likely to benefit from. It was this need that prompted the present book.

The contributors explore the major issues that have emerged from the past twenty years of research and practice, particularly in North America. These include the relationship between reading first language and second language writing, the relationship between reading and writing, approaches to feedback, the role of revision, assessment, and the role of the writing teacher. Original empirical studies are presented, and assumptions behind current practices in the teaching of writing are explored. At the same time the contributors present examples of both quantitative and qualitative approaches to the study of second language writing and writing instruction. This important book will provide a valuable source of information for teachers, for researchers, and for those who need an informed assessment of the current status of research and practice in second language writing.

Michael H. Long
Jack C. Richards

Preface

In 1979, while teaching at the University of Hawaii, I had my first opportunity to teach a graduate course designed to prepare future second language writing teachers. There was no question of using a text, since none were available at the time, and it was relatively easy to put together a packet of readings, as there was little published scholarship in the field to choose from. It might be fair to say that the seeds for this book project were planted then; they continued to grow as I subsequently continued to offer teacher training courses at successive institutions where I taught, always looking for and never finding the text that would provide what I hope this book now offers.

I wish to thank the contributors for working with me to create a book that reflects the vitality of second language writing research and teaching, expertly revising their chapters time and again to answer my never-ending stream of questions. I am also particularly grateful to Martha Pennington for urging me to turn my desire to see such a book into reality. I appreciate the Affirmative Action Faculty Development program at California State University, Northridge, for granting me a reduced teaching load one semester to allow for more focused attention to this project. Holly Jacobs offered invaluable advice and insightful suggestions in reading earlier drafts of the manuscript, helping me to focus on the objectives of the whole project. Joan Carson Eisterhold and Joy Reid offered graceful editorial feedback on my own contributions to this book, guiding me to eliminate both purple prose and excessive obfuscation. The able series editors, Jack C. Richards and Michael H. Long, provided welcome support and encouragement. Last, and anything but least, I thank Ruth Spielman, whose patience with my impatience merits boundless praise.

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Introduction

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Becoming a writer is a complex and ongoing process, and becoming a writing teacher is no less complex. A teacher's journey toward understanding the complexity of both writing and teaching often begins with a look to the past, for scholarship originates from the ability to synthesize past insights and apply them in the pursuit of continued inquiry. It is, therefore, encouraging to realize that a great deal about writing has been learned from studying how native speakers of English acquire skill in writing, knowledge gleaned from a field of study almost unknown in its modern sense a quarter of a century ago. A vigorous developing tradition of scholarship in composition and rhetoric has recently produced excellent bibliographical resource guides (e.g., Moran and Lunsford 1984; Lindemann 1987, 1988; Tate 1987) as well as in-depth reviews of scholarship (e.g., Hillocks 1986), guides to conducting research in the field (e.g., Myers 1985; Lauer and Asher 1988; Daiker and Morenberg 1990), and attempts to define the field of study itself (e.g., McClelland and Donovan 1985; North 1987).

The emergence of composition studies in the past quarter century as an area of professional emphasis within academic communities has also spurred on a tremendous metamorphosis in the teaching of writing, for composition teachers are now being schooled in ways unheard of before the late 1960s. As the eminent rhetorician Edward Corbett noted:

When I contrast the knowledge and competence commanded by my own graduate students and by the young teachers I hear talk at our conferences and conventions with the folklore and trial-by-error that I relied on when I was their age, I am duly humbled but simultaneously inspirited. The enhanced professionalism of the young composition teachers is due, for the most part, to the formal training they have received in rhetoric and composition. (Corbett 1987: 445)

One result of such formal training has been a recognition of the dynamic nature of the teaching process itself and a fuller understanding on the part of writing teachers of how they must acquire the knowledge and skills that form the basis of many typical teacher training programs (Freeman 1989). Bartholomae (1986) sums up how best to

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view those who teach writing: "What characterizes writing teachers, I think, is not that they have a set of 'methods' for the teaching of writing, but they have a commitment to writing as an intellectual activity and to what that activity can produce in the classroom" (p. 5).

For those engaged in teaching second language learners, what is needed is both a firm grounding in the theoretical issues of first and second language writing and an understanding of a broad range of pedagogical issues that shape classroom writing instruction. As teachers, we must realize that for those engaged in learning to write in a second language, the complexity of mastering writing skills is compounded both by the difficulties inherent in learning a second language and by the way in which first language literacy skills may transfer to or detract from the acquisition of second language skills.

In fact, while a background in first language writing may help inform the explorations of second language writing teachers and researchers, it should not be presumed that the act of writing in one's first language is the same as the act of writing in one's second language. For example, first and second language learners may not approach a writing task in the same way nor attend to feedback in the same way. What teachers need is an understanding of all facets of this complex field of writing, and then to filter that understanding through a prism that can reflect how the factor of using a nonnative code affects second language performance. Indeed, much work in second language research has replicated research conducted with native speakers, and the result is that the ways in which second language writing lessons are now often conducted derive in part from the attempt "to incorporate into our work much that is being discovered about language acquisition" itself (Raimes 1983: 543), as well as from a shifting paradigm within the field itself.

In English as a second language (ESL), an increased professional concern in the teaching of writing has perhaps most manifested itself at the annual TESOL (Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages) convention. At the TESOL conventions of the late 1970s, for example, there were less than half a dozen presentations on writing listed on the program each year, whereas the annual conventions starting in the mid-1980s and continuing to the present offer a multitude of workshops, demonstrations, papers, and colloquia on issues related to the teaching of writing and to research findings on the writing of nonnative speakers. Further evidence of increased professional concern is found in the proliferation of dissertations in the field of second language writing, while more articles are becoming available in professional journals. The authors of the chapters in this volume hereby join in the rich dialogue of inquiry we are engaged in today as we move forward to improve our students' abilities and our teaching powers.

Rationale and plan of the book

This book is addressed to those about to embark on the teaching of second language writing as well as to those already engaged in the field. Teachers are dedicated to fostering growth in writing by providing a sequence of lessons and courses designed to move students beyond their entering skill level, and by enabling students to acquire skills and strategies that are not only geared toward promoting success in an academic environment but are operable across a range of potential writing situations. Researchers want to investigate the questions that shed the greatest light on the problems of the field and contribute the most toward the development of a comprehensive theory of second language writing. The concerns of both these groups – teachers and researchers – are addressed in this book.

To accomplish their goals, teachers and researchers want to feel that they are functioning within a framework based on sound theoretical principles, and they also need to communicate clearly with each other. An awareness of the writer and the writing situation, and of the complex interactions between these two elements and with each emerging text, is essential as the writing teacher joins in the community of scholars conducting research in this field. So too, an awareness of classroom exigencies is essential for the researcher who explores the complex questions of writing performance. This book offers both a starting point for those seeking the training necessary for professional growth and a reference point for those already committed to the field.

This volume is divided into two sections. In the first section, six chapters present the current state of thinking on what the teaching of writing to nonnative speakers entails. Each of these chapters provides an overview perspective on one essential element in the total picture of second language writing instruction, providing insight into the evolution of second language writing instruction and the contributions to its understanding made by research in first language writing instruction. Rather than specifically addressing classroom materials or methods or even particular decisions made by writers or teachers, these chapters taken together will help teachers identify and understand what they must consider about the writing process and about the learner as they are designing programs, making curricular decisions, and planning individual lessons. These insights further help to identify the agenda for future classroom research, which can be conducted by the type of teacher-researcher Myers (1985) describes in his guidebook and which Zamel (1987) calls for in her review of writing instruction.

In the second section, seven chapters describe a variety of specific

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studies, each focused on a different aspect of writing and/or the writing classroom, representing some kind of option for either the student writer or the teacher. These options might be viewed as constraints on the writer or teacher, constraints that have an impact both on composing behavior and on course design. Through an awareness of insights derived from such research studies, teachers can work to shape curriculum design and to guide their teaching decisions in a more principled fashion.

All of the chapters have been specifically prepared for this volume, jointly covering a range of the most important issues confronting second language writing teachers today. This volume should prove especially useful in providing a coherent view of current thinking in the field, and can serve as a guide for teachers and researchers seeking to formulate a comprehensive philosophy of teaching.

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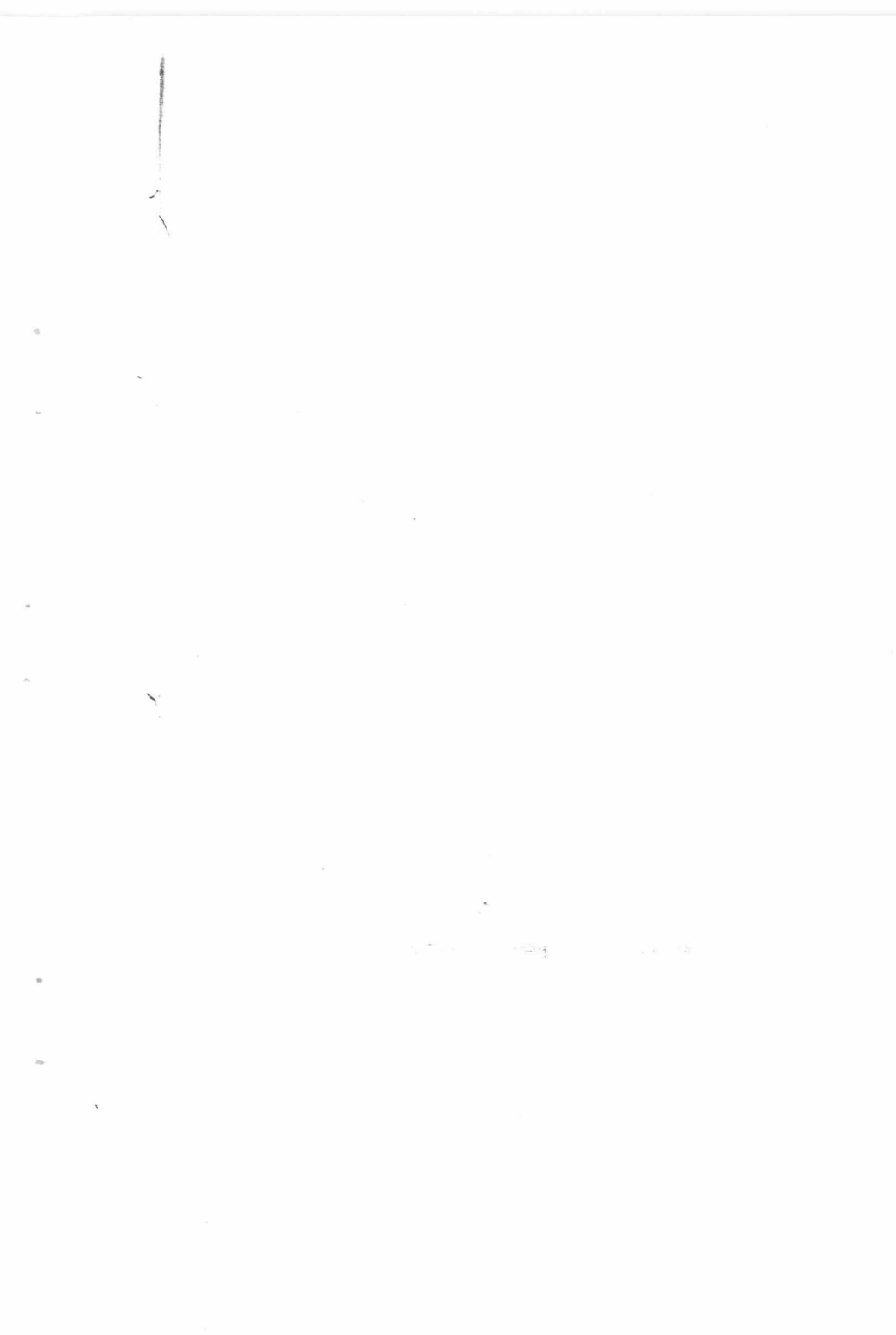
SECTION I:
PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERPINNINGS
OF SECOND LANGUAGE
WRITING INSTRUCTION

Section I presents several chapters which jointly address many of the paramount concerns of the second language writing teacher or researcher who must consider, among other issues, the classroom and the institutional setting of writing courses, the writer and the process of writing, the teacher and his or her responses to writing produced by students, and the written text as a meaning-making event that exists as a component of literacy skills in general. Among the questions the authors of these chapters address are some of the most important and yet complex in the field today.

How has the teaching of ESL writing evolved in the second half of the twentieth century?

Chapter 1, by Tony Silva, traces the history of second language writing instruction in terms of how writing has been viewed within the English as a second language (ESL) curriculum from the 1940s until the 1990s, focusing particularly on how the teaching of writing has changed during the same period. In reviewing the controlled composition model, current-traditional rhetoric, the process approach, and English for academic purposes, Silva provides a diachronic view of composition instruction that can additionally serve to help teachers evaluate curricula and materials in a larger historical framework. Silva's chapter also addresses theory building in the field, and he provides a proposed model within which to view the relationship between theory, research, and practice by focusing on several "givens" of many typical second language classrooms: the L2 writer, the L1 reader, the L2 text, and the L1 context.

What can we learn from work in the field of rhetoric and composition studies?

Chapter 2, by Ann M. Johns, also addresses theory development in ESL composition, but from a very different perspective. She describes the

necessary components of any composition theory and how best to struc-
ture ESL writing classes in terms of three different approaches that
dominate L1 literature and research: process approaches (discussed in
the next paragraph), interactive views (focusing on the writer as one
who interacts with an audience), and social constructionism (referring
to the relationship between the writer, the text, and the social context
in which that text comes into being). Johns reviews a number of insights
from L1 theorists and explains that teachers invariably have a theoretical
stance. She believes it crucial that they articulate and examine the as-
sumptions that guide their choices in the classroom. Each of the three
theories she discusses is presented in terms of how the theory views
several of the "givens" that Silva also discusses: the writer, the reader
(or audience), and the text and the context (as they embody reality and
truth). Finally, Johns addresses how the function of language is addressed
in each of the three theories.

What goes into the process of writing?

One of the perspectives discussed by both Silva and Johns is a concern
with the processes by which writers produce text. Often viewed as evi-
dence of a "paradigm shift" (Hairston 1982), the focus on the compos-
ing processes of student writers instead of on the written products
they produce has had an enormous impact on research into first lan-
guage writing. Applebee (1986) notes that the process approach "pro-
vided a way to think about writing in terms of what the writer does
(planning, revising, and the like) instead of in terms of what the final
product looks like (patterns of organization, spelling, grammar)" (p.
96). It is research into the composing process that forms the subject
of Chapter 3, by Alexandra Rowe Krapels. She reviews the rela-
tionship between first language research and the growing body of re-
search into second language, and particularly ESL, writing processes.
She provides an extensive commentary on most of the major studies
to date, allowing for both a comparative examination of specific re-
search findings and for insights into potential pedagogical applications.
(In Section II, several chapters focus on the effects of altering one
specific feature of the composing process. Alexander Friedlander,
Chapter 7, discusses how the use of one's native versus one's sec-
ond language in the planning stage affects the final written product.
Ulla Connor and Mary Farmer, Chapter 8, offer a specific teaching
suggestion for dealing with revision. Barbara Kroll, Chapter 9, ad-
dresses how the amount of time allowed for the process affects the
final product.)

How should we respond to writing that students produce?

Every writing class, regardless of its underlying philosophy and regardless of the varieties of composing processes activated by students, will invariably result in the production of student texts that teachers will need to respond to. A review of the issues involved in written commentary on student writing is provided in Chapter 4, by Ilona Leki. She presents both the advice of writing experts and the opinions of student writers on what kinds of teacher interventions help student writers improve their ability to compose and to revise, when these interventions best occur, and what form they take. Again, much of the research she reports on is based on work with native speakers of English, though the area of teacher response continues to be of major concern to second language teachers and researchers. (Two aspects of teacher feedback are explored in depth in Section II in chapters based on studies of specific teaching situations. Andrew D. Cohen and Marilda C. Cavalcanti, Chapter 10, report on the match between teachers' claimed agendas for providing feedback and the actual feedback they provide, as well as what students think about and do with the feedback. Ann Fathman and Elizabeth Whalley, Chapter 11, report on a study involving teacher feedback on content versus feedback on form.)

How can we assess writing for program and institutional purposes?

In Chapter 5, Liz Hamp-Lyons addresses the field of second language writing assessment, considering topic variables, human and contextual variables, and procedural variables, identified by Brossell (1986) as the factors which "create the conditions of assessment that approximate conditions under which good writing is known or is apt to occur" (p. 180). She presents an overview of the issues involved in both small-scale and large-scale assessment and key aspects of program development, focusing on the many concerns that must be addressed in the direct assessment of writing. After reviewing some of the issues in test reliability, Hamp-Lyons analyzes four kinds of validity: face validity, content validity, criterion validity, and construct validity. She points out that validity must be established for four components in testing – the task, the writer, the scoring procedure, and the reader – and discusses each of them at length. (The task component is addressed in Chapter 12, by Joy Reid, in terms of how variation in task can affect a student's score outcome.) All of these components form part of a complex network