

Competence in Foreign Language Writing: Progress and Lacunae

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In this paper, we examine some of the factors that contribute to success in foreign language writing. Although our emphasis is on the composing process, the strategies good writers use to discover meaning and “stay on course” while they write, we must, of necessity, first review the role of reading in developing writing competence. We turn next to the role of actual writing, and the development of the composing process.

How reading contributes to writing

Reading provides writers with knowledge of the language of writing, the grammar, vocabulary, and discourse style writers use. This “Reading Hypothesis” is consistent both with general theory and with the research. It is a corollary of the more general Comprehension Hypothesis (a.k.a. the Input Hypothesis, Krashen, 1984, 2003), the hypothesis that we acquire language in only one way, when we understand messages. It is also consistent with a number of studies in both first language and second language development showing that those who read more acquire more of the written language. This is the consistent result of correlational studies (EFL studies include Gradman and Hanania, 1991; Y-O Lee, Krashen, and Gribbons, 1996; S-Y Lee and Krashen, 1996; S-Y Lee, 2001), studies of free reading in school (e.g. Mason and Krashen, 1997), as well as case histories (Krashen, 1993, 2003).

Different writing styles have different linguistic characteristics, but there is also considerable overlap among styles (Biber, 1986): So-called narrative style has, for example, some, but not all of the characteristics of formal, expository prose. Thus, reading anything at all will help all writing, to at least some extent. Smith (1988), however, is undoubtedly right when he advises: “To learn to write for newspapers, you must read

newspapers; textbooks about them will not suffice. For magazines, browse through magazines rather than through correspondence courses on magazine writing. To write poetry, read it.”

How writing contributes to writing

There is no evidence that writing contributes to writing competence; those who write more do not write better and increasing writing does not result in better writing (Krashen, 1984, 1994). Writing, however, makes a different kind of contribution: Writing can make you smarter. When we write something down on the page, we make a representation of our thoughts, of our “cognitive structures.” Once on the page, the brain finds it irresistible to come up with a better version of our cognitive structures. Improving our cognitive structures is real learning (using “learning” in the general sense, not as contrasted with “acquisition”). Writing is not the only way of doing this, of course, but it is a very effective way.

The insight that writing makes you smarter is shared by many observers. Elbow (1975), for example, concluded that meaning is not what you start out with in writing, but what you end up with. Boice (1994) noted that inspiration is the result of writing, not the cause. In addition, there is empirical evidence supporting this assertion, experiments showing that writing can aid in thinking and problem-solving (Krashen, 2003) as well as positive correlations between eminence and amount written among professional writers and thinkers (Simonton, 1984).

The composing process

One of the great triumphs of the language arts profession has been the description of the “composing process,” strategies writers use to solve problems and make themselves smarter.

Studies have shown that good writers utilize several strategies:

Before good writers write, they have a plan. They are, however, willing to change their plan as they write and come up with new ideas.

Good writers are willing to revise. They consider their early drafts to be tentative, and understand that as they move from draft to draft they come up with new ideas.

Good writers delay editing. They concern themselves with formal correctness only after they are satisfied with the ideas they put on the page.

Good writers stop frequently and reread what they have written.

The above are the “classical” components of the composing process. There is good reason to add two more components:

Productive writers engage in “regular daily writing” rather than “binge writing”; instead of waiting until they have large blocks of free time, they write a modest amount each day, a strategy demonstrated to produce more writing as well as more new ideas (Boice, 1994). Also, good writers understand the importance of short breaks that encourage “incubation,” new ideas and solutions to problems that emerge when writers leave their writing and give their minds a rest (Krashen, 2001).

It is reasonable to suggest that the strategies that make up the composing process perform two valuable functions: In addition to encouraging the emergence of new ideas, they keep writers from losing their place. Losing one’s place is very easy to do when problems are complex. A plan obviously helps writers know where they are, rereading reminds writers where they are, delaying editing prevents losing the train of thought, and failure to write regularly is a guarantee of losing one’s place.

The strategies that make up the composing process are most valuable when writing involves complex issues and difficult problems. There is less need for planning, rereading, and revision when writing simple descriptions and summaries, and more need for these strategies when writing requires the integration of a great deal of diverse information, when a complex analysis is called for, or when data can be interpreted in different ways.

Writer’s block

Failure to use these strategies when writing on complex topics is one cause of writer’s block, defined as “an inability to begin or continue writing for reasons other than a lack of basic skill or commitment” (Rose, 1984, p. 3).

Rose has presented a number of cases of writer’s block that are clearly due to lack of mastery of the composing process (Rose, 1984) inspected the composing behavior of college students who scored high on the blocking subscale and noted that they tended to engage in premature editing more than subjects classified as low blockers, and had inappropriate strategies for dealing with complexity. One high blocker, Liz, for example, was so preoccupied with editing and correctness that she would often forget the thought she was trying to express (Rose, 1984, p. 46). Liz also failed to engage in sufficient planning before writing, “but planned in increments as she wrote” (p. 48), which prevented her from getting a sense of the whole essay.

Rose also operationalized writer’s block in the form of a questionnaire. The questionnaire has items dealing with the existence of writer’s block (eg “There are times when I sit at my desk for hours, unable to write a thing.”), referred to as the “writer’s block subscale” as well as subscales that cover hypothesized causes of writer’s block:

1. Premature editing, an excessive concern with form while writing, was covered in several questions, such as: Each sentence I write has to be just right before I’ll go on to the next sentence. Premature editing is, of course, a failure to apply a crucial composing process strategy, delaying editing.
2. A lack of strategies for dealing with complex writing tasks was covered by a “complexity” subscale, e.g. I’m not sure, at times, of how to organize all the information I’ve gathered for a paper. The questionnaire, unfortunately, does not ask about what specific strategies were used to deal with complexity.

Rose reported that for each of his subscales, scores on individual items intercorrelated with each other, as well as with the total subscale, a

result consistent with Rose's claim that the subscales each represented one concept.

Rose administered the entire questionnaire to 351 university students, and obtained significant correlations between scores on the blocking subscale and both the premature editing ($r = .37$) and complexity ($r = .59$) subscales.

These results are consistent with the hypothesis that blocking is in fact related to a failure to apply strategies of the composing process. This is quite clear in the case of premature editing, but, as noted above, the questionnaire does not specify actual strategies used in "dealing with complexity."

The second language writer

Most of the research on the composing process has been done with writing in English as a first language. The first question we need to investigate when discussing the second language writer is whether the composing process is the same for all languages: Do writers in languages other than English use similar strategies when dealing with complex writing tasks for keeping their place, and discovering new ideas? There is suggestive evidence that they do.

In a previous paper (Lee and Krashen, 2003), we administered Rose's blocking questionnaire to subjects whose first language is Mandarin Chinese, undergraduate university students in Taiwan. Mandarin is a particularly interesting language to compare to English because there are obvious differences in the structure of essays in these languages (Cai, 1999; Shi, 2003; but see Kirkpatrick, 1997). We translated the questionnaire into Mandarin and confirmed that the translation was accurate using back translation, that is, we asked highly proficient bilinguals to translate our Mandarin version back into English and compared these translations to the original. We also attempted, using factor analysis, to confirm that the items on Rose's questionnaire grouped together as subscales in Mandarin Chinese as they did in English; in general, they did, although we had to make some minor adjustments.

Our results were nearly identical to Rose's: those who reported more premature editing also reported more blocking ($r = .27$) and those who reported more difficulty with complex writing tasks reported more blocking ($r = .48$). Our results are thus consistent with the hypothesis that at

least some aspects of the composing process are similar in Mandarin and English. Again, however, we have clear evidence for only one specific strategy, delaying editing. Additional research should examine other strategies to confirm that writers in different languages deal with complexity and avoid blocking in similar ways. In addition, we need to look at more advanced writers.

Does the CP transfer from the first to the second language?

If writers in different languages do indeed use the same strategies for discovering meaning and dealing with complex writing tasks, we can then ask if some or all of the strategies transfer from the first to the second language. This question is important practically as well as theoretically. If it is true, the strategies that make up the composing process are part of a "common underlying proficiency" (Cummins, 1989), deeper than any specific language, and need only be developed once, in the first language. Also, it will be much easier to develop these strategies when writing in the primary language, as developing writers will have less concern with mastery of the language and the conventions of writing and can thus focus more easily on meaning.

The results of several studies suggest that at least some aspects of the composing process transfer.¹ Saraki and Hirose (1996) studied the writing behavior of American and British studies majors in Japanese universities. More of those considered "strong writers" in English reported planning for organization before writing in both Japanese and English, and more reported that they wrote "with organization in mind" in both languages. Saraki and Hirose reported no difference in revision behavior between strong and weak writers, however, which may have been due to the fact that subjects were given only 30 minutes to write (but see their note 7 in which they suggest that the time allotted was sufficient to allow revision). Also, only about 30% of the strong writers reported planning in advance, compared to less than 5% of the weaker writers.

Pennington and So (1993) compared the composing process of college students in Singapore writing in their first language (English or Chinese) and in a language they were studying in school (Japanese), and reported "similar patterns" in their writing process. They reported

that “skilled writers” were more willing to revise in both languages, but unskilled writers did not “experience writing as a back-and-forth process of generating ideas and revising texts to find their intended meaning” (p. 51). Unfortunately, no details are provided supporting this claim. Hall (1990), however, reported clear similarities in the revision behavior of foreign students in the US when writing in their L1 and in English: in both cases, about half the revisions affected the information contained in the essays, about 40% were grammatical, and about 7% were “cosmetic,” i.e. handwriting. Also, in both cases about 60% of the revisions were at the word level, 25 to 30% at the phrase level, and 10-15% at other levels.

In Lee and Krashen (2002), we administered Rose’s questionnaire to university students in Taiwan, asking about blocking, premature editing, and strategies for dealing with complexity in both their first and second languages, Mandarin and English. We grouped the premature editing and strategies for complexity subscales together and labeled them “composing process.” We found that those who reported having an efficient composing process in their first language tended to have an efficient composing process in English ($r = .43$). We also found that an inefficient composing process in English was significantly associated with blocking in English ($r = .63$) and we confirmed that an inefficient composing process in Mandarin was associated with blocking in Mandarin ($r = .49$).

Lacunae

The results presented here are suggestive, but there are huge gaps that need to be filled in the research. Fortunately, the work to be done is straightforward:

1. Additional study of the impact of reading on writing. Previous work has in most cases utilized global measures of writing quality; it is important to determine whether all aspects of the written language impacted by reading. Some of the most impressive studies showing the impact of reading on writing in English as a first language are studies of those with modest amounts of formal education who became outstanding writers, and who attribute their success to massive reading (see Krashen, 1993). Such cases

would be even more convincing for writers in English as a foreign language, those who developed high levels of competence in writing English with little or no explicit instruction in writing. Do such cases exist? If they do, were these excellent writers also readers? Evidence in the foreign language situation is more convincing than evidence in the first or second language situation, because input is available from fewer sources in the foreign language situation.

2. Additional study of different aspects of the composing process in a variety of first languages, using multiple methodologies (observation, interviews, questionnaires), with writers at different levels of development. In addition to demonstrating the existence of aspects of the composing process in different languages, it is especially convincing to demonstrate that a failure to utilize these strategies results in blocking.
3. Additional study of the transfer of strategies from the first language to the second, again using different languages, multiple methodologies and examining specific strategies.

If it is confirmed that even some strategies transfer across languages, the results will parallel those seen in studies of bilingual education in children: It has been demonstrated that reading ability transfers across languages: those who read better in their primary language typically read better in the second language (given sufficient exposure), and pedagogical approaches that build literacy in the primary language have been shown to be successful in developing second language literacy (e.g. Krashen, 1996, 2003).

If writers have not developed the composing process in their first language, it is likely that it can be developed in the second language. As noted earlier, however, it will be easier to develop an efficient composing process in the language writers know best, their primary language. Because writing makes such a profound contribution to intellectual development, and because the composing process allows us to use writing as an intellectual tool, if the composing process does in fact transfer, education in the first language is an efficient means of promoting intellectual development.

Such a result would confirm the importance of developing all aspects of literacy in the primary language. It would also show that developing literacy in the primary language not only aids in developing literacy in the second language, it also provides writers with a means of intellectual growth that can be used in any subsequent language they acquire.

Note:

(1) We have restricted this discussion of the transfer of aspects of the composing process to studies in which both L1 and L2 are examined in the same subjects, and correlations of some kind are made. Several published reports show that those writing in their L2 do use aspects of the composing process, which suggests transfer. It is possible, however, that these strategies were taught or were developed through writing in the second language.

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