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Article · September 2018

DOI: 10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0524

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Theory in Second Language Writing

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Framing the Issue

Who needs theory in a practical field like second language writing? Don't 50 years of accumulated classroom experience and teacher knowledge provide guidance enough?

This is one way to look at theory in second language writing. A different way is to regard all teaching as always already theoretical. Everything we know and do comes from somewhere; it is hardly our own invention. If one takes a process approach in teaching second language writing—for example, having students brainstorm, draft, and then providing feedback for revision—one is implementing a theory: that writing is first and foremost a (systematic, multistage) process, and is therefore best taught on that basis. No teaching approach is god-given; all are human-made, typically with much thought and action across generations.

The term “theory” itself has been widely and complexly used in education, applied linguistics, and the social sciences. One useful way of defining theory refers to (1) *thinking tools*—more or less well-developed ways of understanding and speculating about phenomena, including their essential nature, causes, and how they work; and (2) *acting tools*—the putting of one’s thinking on phenomena into action, seeing how it works, and adjusting and adapting it for better action. The phenomenon in this case is, of course, second language writing, and the theoretical positions and possibilities reviewed are those the author has experienced while teaching, reading, and researching in the field.

There is no comprehensive theory of second language writing. This has been lamented by those who believe that, without one, researchers and teachers lack guidance and second language writing will stagnate as a result (e.g., Grabe, 2001). Others have suggested that eclecticism is the heart and soul of second language writing, so no single theoretical umbrella can suffice (e.g., Silva, 2016). What is generally agreed on is that second language writing is a practice-oriented field, with two of its key notions being: (1) writing is both process and product; and (2) second language/multilingual student writers’ needs are

substantially different than those of “native” students, and so must be addressed specifically.

In this entry, the background, possibilities, and perils of theory in second language writing are considered. Begins historically, describing the field’s original dependence on first language (English) composition/writing theory, and then reviews other theoretical influences. Following that, arguments regarding the need for second language writing theory are considered. The entry concludes by speculating on how theoretical development might proceed in this pedagogically oriented field.

First Language Composition as Theoretical Source for Second Language Writing

Written composition has been a required course for American undergraduates for more than a century. Into the 1960s, it was taught substantially from a “current-traditional rhetoric” perspective, in which published (often literary) texts served as models, students wrote single drafts, and teachers provided written comments, corrections, and final grades on those drafts.

A radical response to current-traditional pedagogy developed in the 1960s, eventually coalescing into the *process approach*. Its most influential ideas were: (1) Writing is the discovery of meaning; (2) Writing is a systematic process which can be divided into steps or stages—for example, prewriting, drafting, feedback, revising, and editing, making it highly teachable; and (3) The development of ideas/content precedes the achievement of correct form. The field of second language writing per se was born when its pioneers adopted these principles.

Other Theoretical Influences on Second Language Writing

Running parallel to the process movement—and predating second language writing’s birth per se by a decade—was the theory known as *contrastive rhetoric*. Contrastive rhetoric posited that second language writers reproduce the formal rhetorical patterns of their first languages in their second language writing, thus making it difficult to understand. Students therefore need training in the rhetorical patterns of their second languages, which in contrastive rhetoric has most often been English. Contrastive rhetoric has had a controversial history in second language writing, with charges of cultural essentialism and assimilationism being raised against it. In its reformulation as *intercultural rhetoric* it continues to influence the field.

A second major influence, partly responding to the process approach, has been the *genre approach* to writing. This approach identifies institutionalized forms of written communication sharing common social purposes, or *genres*, and seeks to teach their textual conventions. The systemic functional linguistic theory of Michael Halliday, which views language production as a set of situationally conditioned taxonomic choices, is one major theoretical contributor to this approach.

In second language writing, the genre approach has focused largely on writing for specialized (usually academic) purposes.

A third major theoretical influence on second language writing has been *empiricism*, the philosophy that true understanding of the world is gained only through sense experience. Empiricism has dominated the natural sciences for the past 350 years; its extension to social phenomena sparked the 19th-century birth of the social sciences. Second language writing has a substantial and ever-growing foundation of empirical knowledge based on quantitative, qualitative, and, to a lesser extent, historical research efforts.

A fourth major influence on second language writing has been *cognitivism*, the notion that human activity is best explained by studying the human brain and its processes. In this view, thought and learning are forms of information processing. Cognitivist approaches to (1) writing processes, and (2) written corrective feedback are major examples of cognitivism's influence on second language writing.

A fifth major influence on second language writing has been the theoretical position known as *pragmatism*. As used in the field, pragmatism holds that the main task of second language writing instruction is to prepare students to meet the writing demands of academic institutions. It has been loosely related to American pragmatist philosophy, of which Dewey's progressivist "pedagogy of experience" was a key educational expression, although the differences are substantial. Philosophically developed in second language writing largely in opposition to critical pedagogy (for which see below), pragmatism may be the single most popular theoretical perspective in the field, with the very substantial caveat that many may not view it as theoretical at all, but rather as "just plain common sense."

A sixth major theoretical influence, *critical pedagogy*, holds that a main purpose of education must be to critique and overturn the highly unequal status quo, replacing it with social systems, including educational systems, based on true equality. Critical pedagogy has deep roots in neo-Marxism, although its supporters in second language writing seem as likely to cite poststructuralist (and generally anti-Marxist) philosophers like Foucault.

These diverse schools of thought constitute some of the main theoretical bases of second language writing. As mentioned at the beginning of this entry, there is no grand theory of second language writing, but rather a broad range of theoretical positions and concepts related to its teaching and research. In actual practice, these theories/concepts tend to cluster in groups—a genre approach, for instance, will likely be informed by pragmatist, empiricist, and possibly contrastive/intercultural rhetoric perspectives.

Making the Case

What sort of theory is needed? Grabe (2001) argued for the development of "an agreed-upon construct of writing practice" (p. 40) in second language writing. Such a theory could provide guidance in research, teaching, and testing. In

particular, Grabe envisioned two basic kinds of theoretical possibilities: (1) *explanatory theories*; and (2) *descriptive theories*.

Explanatory theories approximate a scientific ideal in that they model, explain, and predict writing activity and achievement across contexts; they are the gold standard for second language writing theory, according to Grabe. One unique feature of explanatory theories is that they capture the hierarchical nature of writing development and organization—they explain why some (cognitive) processes occur before or as the basis for other processes. Prediction is a second hallmark of explanatory theories, enabling greater standardization of administrative, teaching, and testing procedures. Explanatory theories, according to Grabe, should be grounded in the understanding of writing purposes, processes, and performance outcomes (p. 48).

Descriptive theories are less desirable, but more realistic given the state of the second language writing field (circa 2000), according to Grabe. These are synthetic reviews of research, emphasizing elements and conditions that add up to a coherent set of general statements characterizing second language writing as a whole. Descriptive theories are useful in that they provide a common “definitional understanding” (p. 40) of second language writing, enabling everything from shared “terminology” (p. 40), to direct comparison of research findings, to guidance for future research, to better teaching, curriculum design, testing, and program evaluation. Eventually, descriptive theories may provide the groundwork for explanatory theories. Grabe and Kaplan (1996) attempted to construct one such descriptive theory of writing in general, organizing it around the question: “Who writes what to whom, for what purpose, when, why, where, and how?” (p. 203).

The desire for overarching theory in the human sciences has been questioned on postmodernist grounds. Lyotard (1984) asserted that grand theoretical “meta-narratives,” including those of empirical science, capitalism, democracy, and Marxism, are inadequate because they present single-factor explanations of our current extremely complex and fragmented human condition—for instance, that all real knowledge comes from sense experience (i.e., empiricism). Such “Big T” theories further support a theory-practice divide, and place theory in the superior position. Thus, while Big T theories tell Big T truths, human beings may only weakly be able to put them into practice.

Based on this understanding, Atkinson (2010) proposed that second language writing practitioners develop “theory with a small t.” Small-t theories are: (1) fundamentally grounded in local practices and circumstances, therefore reversing the top-down character of theory in the theory-practice dichotomy; (2) necessarily multiple and divergent, in that they emanate from many divergent situations and experiences; and (3) outward-looking, in that they locate their situated realities in a world where English is deeply implicated in the distribution of social goods and power.

Atkinson’s (2010) proposal is in line with the increasingly popular idea of *praxis*: that theory and practice are complexly and indivisibly united. This may be true in at least two senses. First, theorizing is itself a kind of practice: It is the action of mentally operating *on something*, and creating something different as a result. Each

time we teach we theorize our activities, and are likely to adapt our future teaching on that basis. Second and relatedly, untheorized practice is impossible because teachers are mediators: We mediate complex realities and people. These include students in all their individual and social complexity, other people (e.g., fellow teachers, administrators, parents), curricular requirements, program requirements, physical conditions and spaces, time, money, and the teacher's own ongoing, variegated experience. Our practice is therefore always mediated and mediating. As nodes in a complex and dynamic ecological system, we can never simply replicate our previous classroom practice: There are simply too many moving parts, too many human and nonhuman actors. We theorize and retheorize as we go along.

Pedagogical Implications

Given the above arguments, it is perhaps best to think about theoretical traditions in second language writing as “thinking tools” and “acting tools,” as suggested previously. Our goal is not to enact or reproduce someone else’s theory or practice, but to implement our own personal pedagogy thoughtfully and responsibly. Access to multiple and divergent theoretical frameworks and concepts will increase our ability to do so, as long as they are treated as tools rather than imperatives or recipes for acting. The toolkit metaphor is a powerful one, in that it positions utility as the ultimate guide: If one tool doesn’t work in a particular situation, or another works better than the one originally selected, then put the one originally selected away for another day—a different moment or a different project. Let need guide the tool selection process.

But like all metaphors, second language writing theory-as-tool also has limitations. Tools preexist their uses; they are preformed and therefore not infinitely adjustable or adaptable. Preexisting second language writing theories, on the other hand—if they have any use at all—should be *generative* as well as handy and usable.

SEE ALSO: Critical Approaches to Second Language Writing; Cultural Influences in the Writing of L2 Students; Genre and Second Language Writing; Intercultural Rhetoric

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