What is Second Language Writing?
A Discourse Perspective

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June 2015
Why a Discourse Perspective?

“Discourse-based approaches to language teaching allow for target language engagement that focuses on meaning and real communication.”

(Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2005)
How does a Discourse Perspective View the Ability of Good Writers?

The Good Writer masters:

“The core of literate language, requiring the ability to control and shape the flow of content and information in discourse through linguistic means, while viewing the written text as an autonomous, whole entity.”

(Slobin, 2003)
Skilled writers

Can we create a writing course that leads to such skilled writers?
In Most Second Language Courses to Date...

“Communication is at the heart of second language study, whether the communication takes place face-to-face, in writing, or across centuries through the reading of literature”

(ActFL standards)
SL Learners Acquire Creative Strategies for Composing Texts

- Personal writing strategies
- Individual preferences
- Strategies related to the purpose of writing
- Strategies recruiting language knowledge
- Strategies recruiting discourse knowledge
- Strategies recruiting general content knowledge
Writing

- The cognitive perspective:
  Top-down process – knowledge based
- The socio-cultural perspective:
  The communication focus – a reader based approach
The Cognitive Perspective

- Organization of content
- Creating a global whole – global texture
- Focus on goal of writing – main propositions
- Choice of genre – text type
- Ensuring coherence which creates the flow of content
- Overall cohesiveness and grammatical features
Socio-cultural perspective

- A reader-based approach: the writer tries to define the imaginary reader and attempts to communicate with that reader.
- The writer adheres to writing conventions that fit the writing practices of the relevant community of writers.
- The writer pays attention to the context in which the text is constructed as well as the context in which the text might be read.
Planning

- A clear message
- Supporting ideas
- Effective organization
- Readers’ background knowledge (reader-based)
- The need to revise

top-down, content
SL Writing - Monitor

- Content development
- Knowledge about grammatical and lexical choices
- Emphasis on appropriate choices for communicative efficacy
A Pragmatic/Discourse Approach - Revise

- Reconsider Planning
- Context considerations
- Choosing alternatives
- Presenting evidence
- A well supported conclusion
- Editing: Top-down - bottom-up
Writing and Speaking

- Production of speech and writing allows individuals to share ideas, wants, needs, perceptions and feelings.
- In both cases there is an addressee but in speech it is here and now while in writing it is distant both in place and time.
- While speaking "clarity of meaning" is most important and accuracy of delivery is less. One can always do repair.
- When writing this relatively stable and will remain on paper or the screen and there is usually ample time for correction before submission. That is why the recursive process is crucial.
Reading and Writing – Hirvela, A. (2004)

- Readers’ response – active meaning makers
- Writing to read – writing about a topic in preparation for reading
- Reading to write – reading as a source of input
More on “Reading to Writing” Approach - Wu (1994)

In a study with native and nonnative writers: in a task where a reading passage is used as a prompt to write:

1. the higher as well as the lower nonnative groups made good use of lexical items from the prompt
2. the high group of native speakers did not need to use resources from the prompt
3. the lower native group performed weakly since they did not know how to use elements from the prompt
In the ESL Classroom

- Planned, explicit instruction
- The teacher needs to provide active mediation and support
- Ample opportunities to write for a variety of purposes
- Useful response to writing and constructive feedback at the various stages
The Role of Grammar: Resource for Writing

- Cohesion ➔ Coherence
  - Connectors
  - Reference
  - Tenses
  - Lexical cohesion

- Genre awareness
- Taking a stance
Phases in the Writing Process - As Part of the Course

- Pre-writing – structures activities to provide motivation, fluency, topic development and purpose
- Writing a first draft – focus on meaning
- Response and Feedback – from peers, from the teacher, the writer’s own evaluation
- Second draft – rethinking content and communicative efficacy, attention to grammatical form and text structure
- Editing – bottom up considerations
- Product
Errors

- A proactive approach – what can we learn from errors?
- Shared responsibility – writers become “responsible” for improving and making their “product” more communicative
Conclusion (not final)

- L2 writing courses must practice both the various top-down strategies and the bottom-up considerations.
- We need focus and mediation of genre, communicative presentation, grammar within the given context.
- The discourse approach to writing values all these different areas that relate to communication.
- Effective writing according to the discourse approach, is situated in a set of literacy practices shared by a particular community. It can be achieved by combining the cognitive perspective with the socio-cultural perspective.
Thank you!