

What is the relationship between second language learners' and tutors' beliefs about writing in an academic environment?

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How are second language learners' beliefs about writing academic texts related to those of their language tutors? This study compares learners' and tutors' beliefs on writing in an academic context. The findings suggest that whilst the majority of the learners' beliefs seem to concord with their tutors', some learners may also hold beliefs about L2 writing strategies that are paradoxical or which can frustrate the language tutor. In addition, tutors may need to increase their awareness of the academic writing tasks learners are required to complete to achieve academic success.

1 BACKGROUND

More and more overseas learners are following university courses in Britain. These second language (L2) learners are not only struggling with a developing linguistic code, but also have to contend with an academic culture which can be alien to their beliefs regarding learning and writing. Indeed, their beliefs and learning strategies may be at odds with the educational context they find themselves in. More specifically, their views on learning to write in a second language may differ from those of the language support tutors in their UK university.

Chamot (1993) found that students not only have particular views on language learning, but are also often able to articulate the language learning strategies they actually use. Other researchers have suggested that there is a relationship between students' beliefs and language learning behaviour (e.g. Horwitz 1987, Wenden 1987, and Yang 1999).

Horwitz's "Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory" (BALLI henceforth) was originally compiled from learner and teacher interviews. Information is lacking though on the cultural and educational backgrounds of the teachers and students and the students' language proficiency levels, all of which could influence the type of items on the inventory. It was found that language learners in Horwitz's (1987) study shared many of the stereotypical views about language learning, e.g. over half believed that language learning is primarily learning vocabulary or grammar rules (ibid:124). The study also highlighted paradoxes about language learning. An overwhelming majority agreed that it was important to repeat and practice, nevertheless a large majority also believed that it was wrong to say anything in a second language until one can say it correctly. Although this study provides some insight into learners' beliefs on language learning, it does not tell us how these beliefs relate to the selection of specific learning strategies, or how these beliefs are related to L2 writing.

Yang (1999) provides evidence of a positive correlation between learners' motivational factors and strategy use. However, research from this study focuses primarily on language learning in general and does not look into the distinct nature of the processes and strategies of L2 writing.

The writing processes of skilled L2 writers were examined by Zamel (1983), who argues that linguistic problems seem to concern the ESL advanced writers the least. The more skilled writers managed to devise strategies that allowed them to pursue the development of their ideas without being side-tracked by lexical and syntactic difficulties. They seemed to understand that composing involves the constant interplay of thinking, writing, and rewriting (ibid:172). The least skilled writer, on the other hand, was determined not to commit errors and so attended to them prematurely; viewing writing as a static transcription of a series of

parts: words, sentences and paragraphs (ibid:175,180). However, Raimés's study (1985: 249) which also looked at skilled and unskilled writers, found that "...no clear profile of the unskilled ESL writer emerged from this study of behaviours during composing." Caution needs to be applied to both of these studies because of the small sample in each case and the different data collection methods. Zamel's study used interviews with students, whereas Raimés's study used think-aloud data, which has been criticised for distorting automatised cognition through slowing down the process (Pressley and Afflerbach 1995:9, cited in Cohen 1998:50). Raimés's study also suffered from a lack of description on how the writers were classified as 'unskilled'.

Underlying judgements of skilled and unskilled writers are surely the teacher's own beliefs and values. These then must be reflected in second language writing pedagogy. Shi and Cumming (1995: 98) concluded that teachers' conceptions of L2 writing pedagogy are idiosyncratic in terms of their guiding beliefs, their pedagogical practice and the evaluation criteria of their students and their teaching. Teachers may have only their own experience and anecdotal evidence as to what constitutes sound pedagogy in L2 writing. Moreover, teachers are only too aware that to ignore their learners' preconceived beliefs regarding L2 writing can cause frustration and even friction within the class.

This study intends to explore L2 learners' beliefs about the writing processes and the strategies they employ to produce an academic text. In addition, are the strategies which the learners utilise in harmony with the beliefs of their English language support tutors?

2 METHOD

Student data. The students were enrolled on the Kingston University academic writing courses. These courses are attended mostly on a volunteer basis and are comprised of students from various disciplines. Most overseas undergraduates have to obtain a minimum 6.5 IELTS score or equivalent (i.e. demonstration of an upper-intermediate level). A major source of data was a largely statistical analysis of 33 student-reported responses, solicited via a questionnaire adapted from Horwitz's BALLI. This inventory was compiled from teacher and student interviews. Five factors were uncovered: 1. foreign language aptitude, 2. the difficulty of language learning, 3. the nature of language learning, 4. learning and communication strategies, 5. motivations and expectations. These factors were then broken down into a 34 item Likert-scale questionnaire on issues and controversies on language learning. For this study only three of these factors were used which were then adapted to L2 writing: the nature of learning to write in L2, writing strategies, and motivations. Scores from the questionnaire were calculated as mean averages and standard deviations of the averages. Students' responses to statements were classified as: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neither agree or disagree, 4 = disagree, 5 = strongly disagree. Caution needs to be given when interpreting the results from self-report data. Oller & Perkins (1978 cited in Politzer and McGroarty 1985: 118) believe that self-report data can reflect a desire to give the 'right' answer or please the teacher. Other researchers believe, however, that cognitive behaviour is available through self-reports e.g. Steinberg (1986: 699 cited in Cohen 1998).

Table 1: Student origin and language

No. of sts.	ORIGIN	Mother tongue	No. of sts.	ORIGIN	Mother tongue
12	France	French	1	China	Mandarin
9	Spain	Spanish	1	Korea	Korean
1	Germany	German	1	Germany	German
1	Switzerland	Swiss-German	1	Republic of Congo	French
1	Iran	Persian	6	unknown ¹	unknown

¹ Some of the students in the sample did not complete the background questions.

Teacher data. Face-to-face 30-minute semi-structured interviews based on the three factors from the questionnaire were conducted with the 5 tutors responsible for the academic writing support at Kingston University. All teachers were native English speakers, had recognised teaching qualifications and between 2 and 25 years' experience teaching academic English. The small sample of teachers and students limits the generalisability of the results.

3 RESULTS

3.1 The nature of learning to write in L2

The questions in this section relate to the broad range of issues that are involved in learning to write in L2. They range from the context in which learners find most appropriate to aid the writing process to specific aspects of the written product.

Table 2: The nature of learning to write in L2

	mean	SD
It is necessary to know about the English academic culture in order to write academic English.	1.9	4.2
It is best to learn how to write English in an English speaking country.	2.1	5.7
Learning to write in English is different than learning other academic subjects.	2.7	5.6
I feel timid about my written English.	2.9	4.0
The most important part of learning to write in a foreign language is learning vocabulary.	2.6	6.6
The most important part of learning to write in English is learning the grammar.	2.1	6.3

The contextual factors. 51% agreed that it is necessary to understand the academic culture in order write in that domain. What the academic culture actually is has been very difficult to define. Perhaps easier to define are the writing tasks which students can expect at university. Horowitz (1986) collected data from 36 faculty members (of which approximately 750 were originally contacted) from Western Illinois University as to what type of test questions and "everything else" students were requested to respond to at undergraduate level. The results included:

- (a) *summary/reaction to reading*: typically a summary of specified articles or books followed by a critical response to the reading;
- (b) *report on a specified participatory experience*: a specific 'scene' which students are asked to observe or participate and then reporting the details of the experience;
- (c) *connection of theory and data*: students have to learn about theories from lectures, the class text, or outside readings;
- (d) *case study*: students use class learning/theory to solve a problem;
- (e) *synthesis of multiple sources*: an essay which places emphasis on narrowing a topic;
- (f) *research project*: a proposal or proposed and then executed survey, experiment, or a quasi-experiment of the student's design.

The tutors interviewed in this sample expressed the view that their learners did not fully understand what the academic culture entails in relation to writing, and learners were perhaps more concerned with the language aspects rather than the academic writing skills of referencing, analysis, argument, etc. Learners may look to the tutor for advice and guidance on academic writing conventions because, whilst there is a variety of study guides, one tutor remarked that these guides can give conflicting information as to what is required for university assignments (e.g. Crème and Lea 1997).

Not surprisingly 74% of students endorsed the notion that being in the country where the target language is spoken helps the writing process. The reality is that most of these learners have acquired the ability to write English in countries where English is not the first

language spoken and that the academic writing there can be quite different to that of the UK. Being in the country where the target language is spoken does not necessarily facilitate a greater command of writing in L2 *per se*. Many people can communicate only with a ‘pidgin-like’ command of the L2, but it can be ungrammatical and there may not be the motivation to progress towards more complex language. Research does in fact show that classroom instruction can selectively foster more complex second language development (see Ellis 1990).

The language factors. 49% of learners agreed with the statement that “The most important part of learning to write in English is vocabulary”. Even more learners, 69%, agreed that grammar was the most important. Grammar and vocabulary can be over-prioritised so that meaning becomes secondary. One tutor remarked that some learners may use chunks of language excessively (e.g. linking devices) to the detriment of what they are trying to express. My own experience has shown that less competent writers may or may not be overly concerned with language accuracy in terms of grammar and vocabulary. What appears to be crucial, as Zamel (1983: 180) notes, is that less proficient writers may conceive writing simply as a static transcription of a series of parts: words, sentences, paragraphs. Future research could investigate whether the learner’s conception, and ultimately preferred way of composing, may be linked to cognitive style i.e. Wholistic-Analytic (Riding & Cheema 1991).

3.2 Writing strategies

These are the strategies and processes learners use as they compose (i.e. the sequences of writing behaviours) a text in L2.

Planning. 100% of the learners reported spending time to plan an essay of 1,000 words. However this response does not correspond with what actually happened. A sub-sample of 22 learners were given a writing task to do in class but only one produced any evidence of a plan. This finding supports Oller and Perkins’s (1978) notion, as mentioned earlier, that self-report data can reflect a desire to give the ‘right’ answer or please the teacher.

Table 3a: Planning

How long is it necessary to spend planning an essay of 1,000 words?	
no time	0%
up to 10 minutes	10%
10-20 minutes	22%
over 20 minutes	68%

Transcribing (producing written text). Tutors were consistent regarding their views on helping learners to first express their ideas “within their existing grammatical knowledge” and then work with these first drafts to refine what the learner wants to express. The learners in this cohort indirectly supported this idea by reporting that: “It is ok to guess if you don’t know a word in English” and disagreeing with: “You shouldn’t write anything in English until you can write it correctly”.

Table 3b: Transcribing

	mean	SD
The most important part of learning to write in English is learning how to translate from my native language.	3.6	4.0
If you are allowed to make mistakes at the beginning it will be hard to get rid of them later on.	2.5	4.2
You shouldn’t write anything in English until you can write it correctly.	4.0	7.0
It is ok to guess if you don’t know a word in English.	2.6	7.4
It is important for me to communicate my ideas effectively in writing.	2.3	4.8
It is important to practice writing.	1.8	7.0

Whilst these learners seem to support the idea “It is important for me to communicate my ideas effectively in writing” (2.3 mean), paradoxically they generally agreed with the statement “If you are allowed to make mistakes at the beginning it will be hard to get rid of them later on” (2.5 mean). This pattern coincides with Horwitz’s (1987) study. Perceiving errors as bad habits seems to echo an Audiolingual approach to language learning which was derived from American linguists in the 1950s (see Richards & Rogers 1986) and it has since been attacked for its theoretical approach to language learning (e.g. Chomsky 1966: 153 cited by Richards & Rogers 1986: 59). The learners’ beliefs on learning language and ultimately on writing may influence their conception of the role of the teacher and that of the learner. For example, some learners may be very classroom or teacher dependent (see Broady 1996) and may resist a more communicative approach to learning and writing. Learner education may be beneficial in these circumstances to help learners appreciate that language learning is developmental and is not simply the formation of ‘good’ habits (e.g. see Lightbown 1985).

One tutor expressed her frustration with “language fixated students”, i.e. learners who just want language input: “Some students pick up their pens and switch on at different points of the lesson”. These learners may believe that they can proceduralize (Anderson 1976) language in their own time, and so, as one tutor explained, “...do not come to the class to produce anything”. This may explain why 6% of the students disagreed with the statement: “It is important to practice writing”.

Learners tended to disagree that translation was an important method of learning to write in a foreign language (3.6 mean). This finding supports Cumming and Riazi (2000) who found a negative correlation (−0.29) associated with a lack of achievement in argumentation with students who said they had used *Translation-recitation* practices in their ESL learning.

3.3 Motivation

These questions mostly focus on students’ integrative and instrumental motivations² for writing English. Integrative orientation can be defined as an interest that involves learning an L2 because of a personal interest in the people and culture represented by the target language (Lambert 1974: 98 cited in Ellis 1994: 509). It contrasts with an instrumental motivation which concerns the practical value and advantages of learning the language (Gardner and MacIntyre 1991 cited in Ellis 1994: 513).

Table 4: Motivation

	mean	SD
I enjoy writing in English.	2.8	5.4
People in my country feel that it is important to write English.	2.4	4.2
I would like to learn English better so that I can get to know English people better.	2.4	3.7
If I learn to write English very well, I will get better marks.	2.1	5.3
I want to learn to write English well.	1.6	8.8
I would like to have English friends.	1.8	7.0

Not surprisingly, for this group of students, responses reflected fairly high motivation. Instrumental motivation (e.g., the desire to get better marks) seems to be a slightly stronger force than integrative motivation (e.g., enjoyment of writing, getting to know English people).

Oxford and Nyikos (1989) claim that motivation has a pervasive influence on the reported use of specific kinds of learning strategies. However, the relationship is complicated by the fact that the direction of causation is unknown. Does higher motivation cause greater strategy use or does greater strategy use cause higher motivation?

² No distinction is made between motivation and orientation, for a definition of these terms see Gardner (1985: 10 cited in Ellis 1994: 509).

The desire to have English friends (1.8 mean) was felt strongly, which may well be for friendship or simply an opportunity to practice their English. The importance of forming social networks was also mirrored in a study by May and Bousted (2003) of first year undergraduate native English speaking students at Kingston University. The research highlights that forming friendships is important for students' academic progress and peer support in the first year at university (ibid:45). Peer support may be particularly useful for when students are required to write essay assignments.

While 48% of language learners agreed with the statement that 'If I learn to write English very well, I will get better marks', only one tutor, who works closely with various faculties, discussed the learners in relation to helping them pass their assignments. To enable these overseas students to pass their assignments, however, the tutors may need to be more aware of the typical academic writing tasks students are asked to write (e.g. see Horowitz 1986, Spack 1988). This can be problematic for the tutors because most of them work for the university on a freelance basis which makes it difficult for them gain a deep understanding of the various departments or discuss assignments with university lecturers.

4 SUMMARY

This study focused on learners' and tutors' beliefs underpinning L2 writing: the nature of learning to write in L2, writing strategies, and motivation. Students generally endorsed the fact that being in the country where the target language is spoken helps them to both learn the language and understand the academic culture. Tutors reported that learners are often unaware of what the academic conventions to writing are. Moreover the learners may be confused by conflicting information offered in study guides. Both grammar and vocabulary were reported by learners to be important, but it is not known how these beliefs relate to the learners' proficiency. After all, it is easy for a learner to be blasé about the language aspects of writing when that learner already has a high language proficiency.

This group of learners seemed to have mixed ideas about writing strategies. They rejected the notion of not being able to express themselves unless it was accurate. But at the same time, they endorsed the notion that making mistakes in the beginning can cause problems later on. Moreover, while learners endorsed essay planning, very few provided evidence of doing so. Indeed, all of the tutors understood the problems learners have with expression and organisation and so work closely with their first drafts. Tutors need to be aware of conflicting beliefs and try to resolve them by developing learners' understanding of the language learning process and by helping learners to understand what they do in class and why they do it.

We have seen that motivation, whether it is integrative or instrumental, is a powerful force for this group of learners to learn and improve their L2 writing skills. Indeed, learners may look to their tutors for guidance in their academic writing tasks, so tutors may need to do more to help the students to understand not only the academic culture but also the academic writing tasks they are required to complete for their academic success.

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