

SOME ISSUES FOR THE TEACHING OF WRITING

Claudia Helena Lombana

Foreign Languages Department, Universidad Nacional de Colombia
klaxis@hotmail.com

In this article the definition of writing as a means and as an end is analyzed in order to raise some concerns about the teaching of writing at different schools in general. From this definition I question other important issues that ultimately affect our students' writing production. These have to deal with the use of writing in the mother language, writing activities in the textbooks, the realistic nature of the writing tasks, the other language skills input, and the production of texts. The article pretends to raise awareness in the teaching of writing by taking into account what is implied in the writing skill so teachers can be more attentive in the selection of written tasks for their students.

Writing is the most difficult language skill to master in both, the native language (L1) and the second/foreign language (L2). This is so because real effective writing requires that we be aware of a series of aspects essential to convey meaning: a high degree of accuracy to avoid ambiguity of meaning, the use of complex grammatical devices for focus and emphasis; a careful choice of vocabulary, grammatical patterns, and sentence structures to create a style which is appropriate to the eventual readers (Hedge: 1988). Besides the linguistic knowledge, cognitive and sociocultural (discourse and sociolinguistic knowledge) aspects also influence our capacity to produce good written texts. All this takes time, a good training in the writing process, lots of practice, and the writer's intuition and

skillful perception to materialize his/her thoughts on paper—if not an innate talent.

We teachers of English in Colombia usually deal more with the spoken language and feel challenged and threatened by the writing skill when we have to teach it. We rarely give much thought to the types of writing activities we use in the classroom and pretend to have our students involved in them without considering what underlies these activities. We even fear writing for our own purposes and this comes mostly from previous negative experiences in the process of L1 and L2 writing when we were in elementary and/or high school or as undergraduate students at university. In many occasions, this skill was taken for granted or assumed as something acquired in previous courses; therefore, there was seldom any real formal teaching of the process of writing.

As many of us did not receive any formal training in this process in our native language, Spanish, writing processes and expertise in this skill in Spanish is often limited. This has serious implications for the process of writing in L2, since a nonexistent experience in L1 results in poor or no transfer of basic concepts to L2—as happens with the mechanics of writing, the organization of texts, the use of accurate vocabulary, the coordination of ideas, and other related issues. Many teachers and students have usually experienced a painful process conducted under threatening conditions.

The task of writing becomes even more dramatic when we have to teach it in English: we feel anxious and threatened due to little training in both, our own writing process and teaching strategies in this skill. This article, then, addresses the definition of writing and the different concerns that arise from this definition, so Colombian teachers of English at different schools can be aware—and reminded—of what the writing skill implies in order to make this process more enjoyable for both, teachers and students.

What is writing?

The concept of writing has been widely discussed by many researchers and there is wide information on the topic. For the purpose of this article, I will briefly make reference to the differences between the spoken and the written language. Then, I will concentrate more on the definition of writing as a means and as an end.

As in speaking, the writing ability draws on many of the same linguistic resources, but relies on distinctly different mental processes. While linguists and other scholars have held that speech is primary and writing is a reflection of spoken language, educators have contended that the written language is more correct than the spoken language. Recent studies, however, have tended to reconcile both views. “Neither oral nor written language is inherently superior to the other, but oral and written texts do vary across a number of dimensions, including (but not limited to) textual features, sociocultural norms and patterns of use, and the cognitive processes involved in text production and comprehension” (Cushing Weige: 2002, 15). Moreover, “speaking and writing are frequently used in different settings, for different reasons, and to meet different communicative goals” (ibid: p. 16).

One important difference between the spoken and the written language is the fact that the former is an innate phenomenon worldwide. Unless a person is physically impaired, most human beings have the innate ability to acquire a language. This does not happen with writing, which is an academic skill learned at school and highly regarded in educational settings. Although the modern world needs citizens who are functionally literate, so they can perform a series of daily activities where writing is necessary—filling out forms, writing correspondence, notes, reports, shopping lists, e-mails, etc.—, the type of elaborate writing indispensable in the academic world is seldom used. That is, out of the academic circle, most people’s daily routines do not demand the writing of elaborate descriptions, narratives, or essays, for example.

It is important to underline the two types of settings mentioned above because according to the purpose of writing in each setting, the writing task varies, and so does the teaching of it. Therefore, writing can be defined as a means or as an end. As a means, writing is seen as a form of learning (Raimes: 1983), as a support skill in language learning (Rivers: 1981), or as a testing device to diagnose grammar or comprehension errors. In this way, writing is the tool which enables the student to master the other language skills and allows the teacher to evaluate student’s progress and performance. Hence, writing becomes the means by which students will learn vocabulary, grammatical forms and will carry out a series of other activities that involve the speaking, listening and reading skills. This is, writing is an important tool in the classroom for consolidation learning in other skill areas as well as knowledge of different subjects, and provides extra activities

in the classroom. Then writing as a means rather than an end can include grammatical exercises, dictation, completion, cloze exercises, note taking, copying and reproduction of other texts, and exercises to learn vocabulary.

On the other hand, writing as an end is an expressive form that deals with the text discourse and not merely the writing of isolated words, phrases, and sentences as in the other type. Writing as an end takes two types according to its purpose: 1) pragmatic communication, and 2) creative writing. The first one includes the writing of informal and formal letters, reports, résumés, reviews, concrete descriptions, and other forms of writing connected with everyday affairs.

In the second type, creative writing, a higher level of language manipulation and use is demanded out of both the teacher and the student in order to produce texts that make use of literary devices: narratives, descriptions, essays and academic writing in general. This type of writing requires and implies a sort of fine language use and skillful linguistic competence which are seldom acquired in high school. Moreover, “a minority of speakers of any language acquire the skill of writing with any degree of finesse, and then only after years of training in school and [extensive] practice out of school” (Rivers: 1981, 291) people learn to manipulate the skill at ease. Many people do not continue using this type of writing after completion of school or university studies, unless they get involved in an academic career that demands highly expressive writing.

Creative writing also implies a cognitive activity—planning, translating, reviewing, text interpretation, reflection and text production

(writing models by Hayes and Floyer: 1980; and Hayes: 1996 in Cushing Weigle: 2002)— and is usually easier for teachers and students who have an innate talent in the skill. People who have little or no talent for this skill usually find it painful, and even if they are taught how to produce a good essay, for example, the results are not always very satisfactory. This type of writing is not even achieved in university elective English courses, since it demands a higher artistic expression and creative involvement, being more the concern of bilingual and university English language programs.

If we take a deeper look at the production of written texts in creative writing, we can also find that this activity goes beyond the fact of producing well written grammatical sentences, vocabulary and rhetorical devices. Besides the linguistic and cognitive aspects involved in this activity, social and cultural issues also count in successful writing. As a cultural phenomenon, writing is influenced by sociocultural aspects that determine the way the discourse is organized thus creating distinctive styles in the way students from different cultures approach and produce pieces of writing.

The discourse in English, for example, “can be described as a straight line” while the Spanish one tends to be wordy, lengthy and the written text is usually full of digressions. This is influenced by our culture which is usually oriented to show ostentation of extensive knowledge on a subject. “Spanish writers prefer lengthy introductions, and instead of focusing narrowly on the main ideas of an essay, as in English, Spanish writers make use of digressions and asides to show their breadth of knowledge on the topic” (Collado: 1981; cited in Cushing Weigle: 2002, 21).

Referring now to pragmatic writing—which is the most common type taught and practiced at high schools and universities—this type also needs some sparks of creativity and talent, but is not as demanding as the written production for creative writing. Essay writing for example, is a type of artistic expression of creative involvement which is more difficult and demanding than the writing of an informal or formal letter in pragmatic writing.

Taking into account all the above, and considering the fruitless and bitter results of writing practices of the expressive type at different institutions, the next reflections on realistic writing in both L1 and L2 should be made in order to assess the type of writing activities teachers are introducing in the classroom.

I. Is the teaching of writing focused on real experience?

Before deciding on the type of writing we want our students to perform in or out of class, we should ask ourselves several questions.

I.1 How much writing do the students do in their native language and what do they write about?

It is necessary to consider that by the time six-year olds start their elementary schools; their L1 has a very wide repertoire from which they can draw experiences and aspects that they are able to refer to by using a very fluent communicative speech. The students then start learning the basics of writing through the alphabet and to produce short sentences. Throughout elementary school, the students acquire knowledge in the different subjects and writing is the means by which they take

notes, emphasize learning and, in the majority of the cases are tested.

For the English language teacher it is essential to establish a connection with the other Spanish speaking teachers in order to know what type of real instruction in writing is given in their Spanish classes and content based courses, how the written skill has been taught, the mechanics, the grammatical structures and the type of texts that the students have been or are producing in their native language. Students should be taught all the above before facing the writing skill in L2. In this way, elementary students would be able to transfer the basic concepts they have learned in L1 to L2 and the continuous progress in L2 writing could be enhanced through more advanced grades in high school. Moreover, it is indispensable to know that the students in elementary school will not be able to produce full texts in L2, but will be exposed to the spelling of English words and the writing of phrases and short sentences. In other words, the written code is used in extra activities to emphasize the other language skills rather than using expressive writing in full texts.

High school students, on the other hand, start producing texts of several kinds. Students are usually exposed to some sort of expressive writing: letters, reports, note taking, short paragraphs, dialogues, guided and free compositions, narratives and descriptions. As with the elementary school students, the teacher should be aware of the previous training students have had in their L1 writing process.

One way to do this could be by checking on the stages of writing the students usually have to go through: 1) notation: copying chunks of text from a text, reproducing parts of a text which has been read or heard. Taking notes makes part of sensitizing students to a new

phonological system; 2) writing practice: doing grammatical exercises, writing simple dialogues, uncomplicated translation exercises, dictation and cloze procedure. Students move from guided exercises (structures, vocabulary, sentences are expanded and transformed) usually for the preparation of oral activities such as reports and dramatizations; and 3) pragmatic writing: writing instructions, reports, résumés, concrete narratives and descriptions and correspondence connected with everyday affairs (Rivers: 1981). This third stage would probably fit more accurately in 10th and 11th grades.

Free creative writing at a more advanced level in high school demands a higher students' oral expression and more advanced receptive skills (reading and listening). If the students do not have a high level in the other skills, facing free creative writing can end up in the production of hybrid language that makes students believe they are writing acceptably, but what they are indeed producing are, as Rivers says, "monstrosities." "To be sure [of acceptable results], attempts at writing creatively can and should be encouraged from an early stage, so long as students have a clear realization of the limitations of knowledge within which they are composing" (Rivers: 1981, 297). The ability of the L2 teacher to guide the student through this task successfully also becomes a key aspect. He/she should be able to sense how much his/her students are capable of producing and judge the textbook activities. The second question here deals with this aspect.

1.2 What type of writing activities do the English textbooks include? How much of these activities have the students practiced in their native language?

One aspect foreign language teachers should know about their students' writing is

the extent of practice students have had in L1 in the same type of written activities offered in the English textbook. As intended by most English textbooks, picture description, the narrative of a story or a movie, a written report about a graded reader, an informal or formal letter, all these types of writing activities are usually intended to test the knowledge of L2 with the purpose of making students rehearse what is expected from them especially in the eventual case of being tested internationally in their L2 proficiency. We have to remember that English textbooks are what English writers in their own experience expect students to produce in L2. But how well prepared are our students to do the same type of writing activities in our native language?

Let us take for example the activity of picture description, which is one favorite activity in most textbooks. How do your students describe pictures of people and landscapes, for example, in Spanish? I do not think this is a typical activity in the Spanish class, so how are the students going to face this type of written activity if they have seldom or never done it in L1. It is then the task of the L2 teacher to check on students' capacity to generalize and to note the essentials in a picture, so they can do this activity with some *décor*. Also, how much vocabulary does the student know in order to make reference to the parts of the picture? How about the grammar, the mechanics, the style and the organization of the text?

Once again, a student who makes a very good description of a photograph in Spanish will be able to transfer some cognitive knowledge into English. This, added to an intermediate proficiency in L2 might result in a very good piece of free creative writing. Nevertheless, one should question how realistic this activity is and if it is really useful in our daily lives, which leads us to our third question.

1.3 How many of these activities will be of realistic use in their future lives?

One motivating factor is to realize how down to earth the writing activities offered in the textbook are. Since the L2 teacher is dealing with activities that are most of the time culturally embedded, and that according to the authors might be of interest to the students, the teacher could in principle ask his/her students how motivating these tasks are and consider if they are really useful for the students' particular interest.

Filling out forms, writing letters, shopping lists, reports, daily agendas, are some examples of the pragmatic writing most adults have to do in their daily lives in L1, for example. The writing of literary descriptions, narratives, essays, and more creative language is seldom used out of school in the native language. Now, how about the L2 writing experience for most people in their daily lives? I question the relevance of the teaching of writing to most students with the rhetorical devices that are necessary to function in an academic world. The problem here is to see the purpose of the writing skill and how to teach it in such a way that the writing tasks become realistic and relevant.

According to Byrne (1988), the use of L2 "texts as a basic practice format... can make the writing activities more meaningful for the students and thereby increase their motivation to write well. The text provides a *setting within which they can practise*, for example, sentence completion, sentence combination, paragraph construction, etc. in relation to longer stretches of discourse. In this way they can see not only why they are writing but also write in a manner *appropriate to the communicative goal of the text* (p. 25).

Students could then be helped "by making writing tasks more realistic, by relating practice to a specific purpose instead of asking [students] to write simply for the sake of writing" (Byrne: 1988, 25). Teachers could explore more opportunities in order to integrate the writing activity with the other language skills. "Writing tends to get relegated to the level of exercises partly because it is treated as a compendium to the lesson rather than a worthwhile learning activity in itself. While it is convenient ...to be able to set written work as homework and while writing may not come very high on the list of priorities, this does not mean that it cannot take its place as part of a natural sequence of learning activities" (ibid: p. 25).

Using texts is only one way to make the writing task more realistic. Other forms to make writing more realistic and relevant include 1) the identification of some forms of writing which are likely to be relevant to the learners' needs: institutional communication (letters written to the President of the school asking for school facilities, for example), communication among friends (invitation to events such as birthday parties, lectures, etc.), notes (apologies, warnings, etc.), and stories and narratives at fairly basic and intermediate levels (Byrne: 1988). This type of production deserves some language input that is often taken for granted when students are asked to write "compositions." Therefore, L2 language exposure should be considered.

4. How much input and practice have you provided before facing the writing activities?

One common characteristic in most compositions produced by students without the appropriate guidance is the "hybrid" type

of writing that is common among nonnative speakers—and which was mentioned previously. Teachers usually complain about the low quality of written products they get from their students. What many of us have not realized is that oral production takes time and varies from one student to another, and that a good oral production can aid the written one. Also the two receptive skills of listening and reading expose the non-native speaker to L2 examples, providing good basis for the speaking and writing skills. Plenty of exposure to the L2 language through listening, reading and reinforcement of oral practice, a good guidance from the teacher emphasizing aspects of language, and using texts as linguistic models to copy and produce, can help the teacher and the students in the writing task. We should not expect our students to produce good pieces of writing before some internalization of vocabulary, grammatical structures, the mechanics of language, has taken place through the many exercises practiced in writing as a means of communication. Once students have sufficiently dealt with such exercises, they can be introduced to the writing of short texts, which is in fact, what writing is about.

5. Going beyond the production of right sentences: How are we dealing with the production of expressive texts?

If we consider that successful writing goes beyond the ability to produce clear and correct sentences, our role as teachers demands a more serious involvement. We then teach to build communicative potential that can help the students to write whole texts which form connected, contextualized and appropriate pieces of communication (Hedge: 1988). If this is really what we want to teach, then the teaching of writing will have to take into account the aspects of expressive writing in

order to enable students to communicate ideas clearly, fluently and effectively.

Although creative writing demands a great command of the language, this does not mean that we can not use this type of writing at more basic and intermediate levels. This could be done only if students have previously worked the language in the other language skills and start out with a very good grasp of vocabulary and structures in L2. The more the students have successfully used writing in grammatical exercises, copying, reproduction, dictation purposes, the better chances they will have in the development of their expressive writing. As said before, appropriate input and manipulation of the other skills will also help them in the writing process, especially reading. Also, we have to pay attention to the individual aspects of writing which involve working memory, motivation and affect, cognitive processes and long-term memory (Hayes' model, in Cushing Weigle: 2002), besides other sociocultural factors.

Once again, the teacher has to understand the difference between the conception of writing as a means, and expressive writing as an end, which is the most difficult one to teach and produce. Teaching writing at public schools becomes particularly more difficult when the social context where English is taught does not reinforce the input of the other skills given in the classroom. The only exposure to L2 in most occasions is the classroom, rendering the experience subjected to the artificial situation of the classroom, thus making the learning of L2 even more difficult. The pressure of a monolingual Spanish environment affects the instruction in L2 as well as students' performance, so we have to provide for healthy L2 environments that can make the learning experience as vivid and real

as possible: a friendly classroom where anxiety levels are low and assessment is used in order to learn and not for a grade.

Conclusion

What this article intended to do was to explore the concept of writing which deals directly with the type of writing activities we develop in our classes. Writing, on one side, is a means of instruction and can help the students to learn the other skills. However, writing as an end implies more skillful training, a high proficiency and creativity on the part of the teacher. As for the students, they could write better compositions in L2 (expressive writing) after being extensively exposed to exercises in copying, note-taking, grammatical structure training, combination of sentences, paragraph structure, analysis of texts, etc. and after having developed a higher proficiency in the oral, reading and listening skills—working memory is required. It would be advisable not to expose students directly to free writing in L2 at once, but prompt guidance in the stages of writing. Well structured activities would also help students to enhance L2 compositions and render the teacher's activity more productive and well focused. Successful writing also depends on the practice students have had in their native language so they can be able to identify certain concepts and

practicalities of the process of writing (mechanics, organization and coherence) into L2. One last concern deals with the triggering factor in writing: how motivating the textbook activities or the teacher's writing tasks are for the students and how practical the writing practice is. Although the writing skill is the most difficult to learn and master in L2, we have to remember that as native speakers of Spanish (L1) our writing in our own language is often deficient too and that we tend to have a more oral oriented communication. Therefore, handling writing in L2 should be strategic and realistic.

References

- Byrne, D. (1988). *Teaching Writing Skills*. London: Longman UK.
- Cushing Weigle, S. (2002). *Assessing Writing*. US/UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hedge, T. (1998). (10th Impression). *Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University.
- Raimes, A. (1983). *Techniques in Teaching Writing*. NY: Oxford University.
- Rivers, W. (1981) (2nd ed.). *The Writing Skill. Teaching Foreign Language Skills*. Chicago: University of Chicago.