

Writing skills: theory and practice

MONICA RANDACCIO

Dipartimento di Scienze Giuridiche, del Linguaggio,
dell'Interpretazione e della Traduzione
Università di Trieste
mrandaccio@units.it

SUNTO

Questo articolo ha un triplice scopo: ci si prefigge dapprima di tracciare lo sviluppo della didattica della scrittura in inglese come seconda lingua a livello teorico, in un arco temporale che va dagli anni Cinquanta agli anni Novanta del secolo scorso. Successivamente si analizzano i principi organizzativi che governano la teoria della scrittura in inglese come seconda lingua. Di seguito, oltre al materiale usato in aula, si presenta la lezione che introduce la parte del mio corso di inglese dedicato alla scrittura (livello B2 del Quadro Comune Europeo di Riferimento) per gli allievi del primo anno che studiano inglese come terza lingua presso la Scuola Superiore di Lingue Moderne per Interpreti e Traduttori dell'Università di Trieste. Infine si cercherà di trarre alcune conclusioni sulla base dell'analisi dei temi scritti dagli studenti.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is threefold. First, a diachronic development of ESL (English as a Second Language) composition theory from the 1950s to the 1990s will be outlined. Second, the organising principles relevant to ESL composition theory will be analysed. Third, a survey of the material used in my English classes and a presentation of the introductory unit on writing skills will be given. Finally, some tentative conclusions derived from my students' compositions will be drawn.

PAROLE CHIAVE

TEMA/COMPOSITION; SCRITTURA/WRITING; ABILITÀ/SKILL; PROCESSO/PROCESS.

1. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ESL COMPOSITION

The development in ESL composition has, to some extent, been influenced by developments in the teaching of writing to native speakers of English. Specifically, the history of ESL composition has its turning point around 1945, the beginning of the modern era of second language teaching in the United States, and this history can be

viewed as a succession of approaches and orientations to Second Language (L2) writing. Each approach or orientation at some stage achieves dominance over another, but none of them totally fades. Tony Silva has singled out those which have been the most influential approaches, namely, controlled composition, current-traditional rhetoric, the process approach, and English for academic purposes¹.

1.1 CONTROLLED COMPOSITION

Controlled composition – sometimes referred to as guided composition – has its roots in the audio-lingual approach, which dominated L2 learning in the early 1950s and early 1960s. Notions relevant to controlled composition are that language is speech (from structural linguistics) and that learning is habit formation (from behaviourist psychology). Given such basic notions, it is not surprising that, from this perspective, writing was considered as a secondary concern. Charles Fries, the pioneer of the audio-lingual method, in *Teaching and Learning English as a Second Language* (1945), neglected writing, conceding only that «written exercises might be part of the work» of the second language learner².

In the controlled composition model, writing therefore functions as «the handmaid of the other skills» (listening, speaking and reading), «which must not take precedence as a major skill to be developed»³ and must be «considered as a service activity rather than an end in itself»⁴. In controlled composition

students are given a passage to work with; they do not, therefore, have to concern themselves with content, organisation, finding ideas, and forming sentences. They write the passage down, making a few specified changes, usually of a grammatical or structural nature⁵.

¹ SILVA 1990, pp. 12-17. RAIMES 1983, pp. 6-11, proposes a slightly different classification: controlled-to-free approach, the free-writing approach, the paragraph-pattern approach, the grammar-syntax-organization approach, the communicative approach, the process approach.

² FRIES 1945, p. 8.

³ RIVERS 1968, p. 241.

⁴ IBIDEM, p. 258.

⁵ RAIMES 1983, p. 97.

The focus is thus on mastery of grammatical and syntactic forms, on formal accuracy and correctness. Controlled programmes of systematic habit formation are designed to avoid errors caused by first language interference and to positively reinforce appropriate second language behaviour.

The writer thus becomes a manipulator of previously learned language structures; the reader is the ESL teacher in the role of editor and proofreader, not particularly interested in quality of ideas or expression but primarily concerned with formal linguistic features. The text is a collection of sentence patterns and vocabulary items, the writing context is the ESL classroom and audience or purpose are negligible⁶.

1.2 CURRENT-TRADITIONAL RHETORIC

In the mid-1960s an increasing awareness of ESL students' need to produce extended written discourse led to the suggestion that controlled composition was not enough and that a bridge between controlled and free composition was needed. As Silva suggests, «this vacuum was filled by the ESL version of current-traditional rhetoric, an approach combining the basic principles of the current-traditional paradigm⁷ from native-speaker composition instruction with Kaplan's theory of contrastive rhetoric⁸.

Kaplan defines rhetoric as the method of organising syntactic units into larger patterns and, as this method varies from language to language, he suggests that ESL writers «employ a rhetoric and a sequence of thought which violates the expectations of the native reader»⁹.

⁶ SILVA 1990, p. 13.

⁷ Silva maintains that one of the most commonly cited characterisations of the current-traditional paradigm is that of Richard Young. Its features include: the emphasis on the composed product rather than on the composing process; the analysis of discourse into words, sentences and paragraphs; the classification of discourse into description, narration, exposition, and argument; the strong concern with usage (syntax, spelling, punctuation) and with style (economy, clarity, emphasis).

⁸ SILVA 1990, p. 13.

⁹ KAPLAN 1966, p. 4.

The central concern of this approach is the logical construction and arrangement of discourse forms. Of primary interest is the paragraph: attention is given to its elements (topic sentences, support sentences, concluding sentences, and transitions) and to the various options for its development (illustration, exemplification, comparison, contrast, classification, definition, causal analysis). This approach thus addresses larger structural entities (introduction, body and conclusion) and organisational patterns or modes (narration, description, exposition and argumentation).

The perspective of this approach views writing as a matter of arrangement, of fitting sentences and paragraphs into prescribed patterns. Silva thus comments:

The writer fills in a pre-existing form with provided or self-generated content. The reader is easily confused and perhaps vexed by unfamiliar patterns of expression. The text is a collection of increasingly complex discourse structures... The implicit context for writing is an academic one, with the instructor judgment presumed to mirror that of the community of educated native speakers¹⁰.

1.3 THE PROCESS APPROACH

A dissatisfaction with controlled composition and the current-traditional approach led to move away from an emphasis on the written product to an emphasis on the process of writing. Many felt that both controlled composition and the linearity and prescriptivism of current-traditional rhetoric discouraged creative thinking and writing. The underlying assumption is that the composing process was not linear and straightforward.

Guidance through the process is therefore preferable to control: in fact, content, ideas and need to communicate would determine form. The teacher's role is to help students develop strategies for getting started (finding topics, ideas and information, planning structure and procedure), for drafting (encouraging multiple drafts), for revising (adding, deleting, modifying and rearranging ideas) and for editing (checking vocabulary, sentence structure, grammar).

¹⁰ SILVA 1990, p. 14.

Learning to write entails developing an efficient and effective composing process. The writer is the centre of attention and the reader, focussing on content and ideas, is not preoccupied with form. The text is of secondary concern, whose form is a function of its content and purpose and there is no particular context for writing in this approach. It is the responsibility of the individual writers to identify and appropriately address the situation, discourse community and sociocultural setting.

1.4 ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES

The process approach was criticised by the proponents of English for academic purposes, which was an attempt to construct a new and distinct perspective on ESL composition. In particular, Reid has suggested that the process approach neglects to consider variations in writing processes due to differences in individuals, writing tasks and situations; development of schemata for academic purposes; language proficiency; level of cognitive development; insights from the study of contrastive rhetoric¹¹.

Similarly, Horowitz maintains that the process approach creates a classroom situation which bears little resemblance to the situations in which students' writing will be exercised¹². He goes on to suggest that a process orientation ignores certain types of important academic writing tasks, such as essay exams.

Therefore, from this perspective, writing is the production of prose that will be acceptable at an American academic institution and learning to write is part of becoming socialised to the academic community. As Silva points out:

the writer is pragmatic and oriented toward academic success... The reader is a seasoned member of the hosting academic community who has well-developed schemata for academic discourse and clear and stable views of what is appropriate¹³.

¹¹ REID 1984, pp. 529-533.

¹² HOROWITZ 1986, pp. 141-144.

¹³ SILVA 1990, p. 17.

Consequently, the text is a conventional response to a particular task type that falls into a well-defined genre; the context is the academic community and the typical tasks associated with it.

2. ORGANISING PRINCIPLES RELEVANT TO ESL COMPOSITION

The approaches described by Silva reflect a chronological order of development in ESL composition: however, it is interesting to note how another scholar, Ann M. Johns, has discussed approaches in ESL composition.

Drawing on the model presented by Berlin¹⁴, she has taken into account the four components of First Language (L1) composition and investigated their interaction. According to Johns, the ways in which these components are viewed give rise to different organising principles in ESL composition. These components are

- 1) the writer;
- 2) the audience (or reader);
- 3) reality and truth;
- 4) the sources of language in written texts¹⁵.

2.1 THE WRITER: EXPRESSIONISTS AND COGNITIVISTS, INTERACTIVISTS AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISTS

Some L1 theories view the writer as the creator of written text, and the process through which the writer goes to create and produce discourse is the most important component in the theory. In the process approach, two groups have been identified, i.e. the expressivists and the cognitivists. Expressivism, which developed in the first decade of the twentieth century and reached its zenith in the

¹⁴ Berlin's model of L1 composition is presented in the following works: *Contemporary composition: The major pedagogical theories*, 1982; *Rhetoric and reality: Writing instruction in American colleges, 1900-1985*, 1987; *Rhetoric and ideology in the writing class*, 1988.

¹⁵ JOHNS 1990, pp. 24-36.

late 1960s and early 1970s, when the individual expression of honest and personal thoughts became a popular trend in teaching writing.

Teachers adopting this view are nondirective; they facilitate classroom activities designed to promote writing fluency and control over the writing act. Their textbooks contain assignments designed to encourage self-discovery, such as journal writing, especially to produce topics for essays.

Cognitivism, on the other hand, sees writing as problem-solving and has had more influence on ESL research and teaching. The two key words in cognitivist theories are thinking and process.

The first is the theme of Flower's book *Problem-solving Strategies for Writing* (1998). This book requires students to plan extensively. Planning includes defining the rhetorical problem, placing it in a larger context, making it operational, exploring its parts, generating alternative solutions and arriving at a well-supported conclusion. The writing process then continues by translating students' plans and thoughts into words, and by reviewing their work through revising and editing¹⁶.

A second view considers the writer as a person involved in a dialogue with his/her audience. The text is thus what an individual creates through a dialogue with another conversant. In ESL classes then those teachers who take an interactive view can speak of English as 'writer-responsible': therefore, the students must make topics, arguments, organisation and transitions clear to the reader.

Besides the two roles of the writer as creator and the writer as interactant, a third role of the writer appears in the social constructionist view. Writing is considered a social act that can take place only within and for a specific context and audience. For the proponents of this view the language, focus and form of a text comes from the community for which it is written. Therefore, knowledge, language and the nature of discourse are determined for the writer by the 'discourse community'¹⁷.

¹⁶ IBIDEM, p. 26.

¹⁷ SWALES 1990, has given an extended definition of 'discourse community' in line with the social constructionist view.

2.2 THE AUDIENCE

To each vision of the writer mentioned above, there are corresponding views of the audience in L1 literature. For the expressivists, who contend that writing is an individual act, it is the competent writer who establishes purpose, meaning and form; in so doing the writer «creates the audience»¹⁸. Teachers who privilege expressionism encourage students to write with honesty and consider that the central purpose of their writing is the production of a text which shows creativity and individual expression.

For the cognitivists, the issue of audience is more complicated. Though the focus of their approaches is the writer's cognitive structure, understanding how a sense of audience is developed in the writer's mind is also one of their central concerns.

Flower (1979), for instance, discusses the inability of student writers to succeed in their classes and attributes their problems to the failure to move cognitively from 'writer-based' to 'reader-based' prose. As Johns point out:

though audience theory as it appears in L1 literature has generally been neglected in ESL, the concept of interactivity of reader and text... can be extended to create a middle ground in a theory of audience in writing¹⁹.

The coherence of a text must therefore be established through the compatibility between the schemata of the reader and the organisation, content and argument of the text. It thus becomes increasingly clear that the complexity of the relationship between writers and readers requires a complex model of audience. The ideal model thus must «balance the creativity of the writer with the different, but equally important, creativity of the reader»²⁰.

Finally, the social constructionists maintain that writing is principally a social act, an act in which the expert reader, an initiated member of the discourse community, is all-powerful. In this case, the reader/audience has the power to accept or reject

¹⁸ NYSTRAND 1986, p. 61.

¹⁹ JOHNS 1990, p. 30.

²⁰ EDE, LUNSFORD 1984, p. 16.

writing as coherent, as consistent with the conventions of the target discourse community.

This is particularly true in the academic context, where the faculty audience is particularly omniscient, for they set the entire classroom agenda and have the final word on paper grading.

2.3 REALITY AND TRUTH

In addition to the writer, the writing and the role of audience, a third feature is represented by the view of truth and reality. This is an important feature because, as Berlin points out, «in teaching writing, we are tacitly teaching a version of reality and the student's place and mode of operation within it»²¹.

In the cognitive approach, reality and truth resides in the writer's mind and writing therefore discloses a private vision of the world.

Another view is instead held by the interactionists who believe that reality and truth is to be found in both the writer and the readers. In this kind of interaction, the writer, through the text, tries to appeal to the reader through a reality upon which the writer and the reader can agree, and to convince the reader of a particular argument within this reality.

A third view of reality and truth is finally that of the social constructionists, who believe that the nature of the text is determined by the community for which it is written.

These three views of truth and reality undoubtedly influence the classroom activities and the assignments of the ESL teacher:

a) If the teacher believes that the reality resides in the individual, he/she will encourage to be creative and find their own topics organisation for their texts.

²¹ BERLIN 1982, p. 766.

- b) If the teacher thinks that reality must be negotiated between writer and reader, he/she will help students in developing arguments that are consistent with another reader's view.
- c) If the teacher takes a social constructionist view, he/she will make his/her students acquainted with the conventions and rules of the community for which the student writer is producing a text.

These conventions and rules, not the students' own, will become the standard for teaching and evaluating class writing activities.

2.4 THE SOURCES OF LANGUAGE IN WRITTEN TEXTS

The final feature to be taken into account in ESL composition theory is language. For the expressivists and the cognitivists, which focus on the writer and the writing process, form and language derives from content²². The language of a composition is the writer's own, the product of his/her experience and of a creative urge.

For those who view writing as an interactive process, language draws from the content schemata of both writer and reader: the language of the writer makes concession to the reader, and similarly, the reader must concede to the writer his/her own language. If language unfamiliar to the reader is used, the writer leads the reader through the text in a manner that assists comprehension.

Finally, the social constructionists views language as a product of the discourse community for which the text is written. The 'outsider' writer's alternatives for language are therefore severely rejected and students must learn to surrender their own language and modes of thought to the requirements of the target community.

3. MATERIAL USED FOR MY ENGLISH COURSE (B2 LEVEL)

On the basis of what has just been discussed, Ann Johns concludes with two interesting remarks on ESL composition theory and research. First, any viable

²² MILLER, JUDY 1978, p. 15.

theory of ESL composition must be complete, i.e. it must include the elements mentioned by Berlin. Second, more importantly,

because world views among theorists, researchers and teachers... in ESL differ in terms of these basic elements, *no single, comprehensive theory of ESL composition can be developed on which all can agree*²³.

This last statement proves to be true on a close analysis of the two textbooks used in my ESL classes, as they draw on various approaches simultaneously and emphasise, according to the situation, either the role of the writer or that of the audience, privileging a certain view of reality and language.

These two textbooks are respectively *Academic Writing: from paragraph to essay* (2003) by Dorothy E. Zemach and Lisa A. Rumisek and *Developing Composition Skills: Rhetoric and Grammar* (2003) by Mary K. Ruetten.

Academic Writing: from paragraph to essay is designed to help university level students with an intermediate ability in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) to gain confidence in writing academic prose. It combines a process approach to writing with an emphasis on paragraph structuring.

Students are in fact asked to write topic and concluding sentences and to organise paragraphs coherently. Moreover, they must learn to use appropriate vocabulary, grammar and transitional devices in the paragraph body (Units 1-6). They will later apply what they have learn about paragraphs to essay writing (Units 8-11). Moreover, they learn to manipulate key writing structures – an approach reminiscent of controlled composition.

Though the focus of the textbook is that «type of writing used in university courses and exams in English-speaking institutions of higher education»²⁴, critical thinking is encouraged in order to make students aware of the impact of their choices of words, sentences, and organisational techniques on the effectiveness of their

²³ JOHNS 1990, p. 33 [emphasis mine].

²⁴ ZEMACH, RUMISEK 2003, p. iv.

writing. Such an emphasis on critical thinking reflects the cognitivist view, according to which interaction between the writer and the audience is a relevant feature of writing.

Developing Composition Skills: Rhetoric and Grammar is also an intermediate-level writing text for academically bound EFL students and its organisation derives mainly from the current-traditional rhetoric approach to writing. The author states that the text is based on the following assumptions:

- 1) reading, writing, and thinking are interrelated activities;
- 2) to write well, writers must engage with ideas;
- 3) writers must be aware of the context in which they are writing;
- 4) fluency in writing is not to be confused with grammatical accuracy: writers need to develop both.

These assumptions, however, not only allow each chapter to focus

on a method of development typically used in academic writing: narration, description or analysis... [and] on types of analysis: process, comparing/contrasting, classifying and cause and effects²⁵

but also to adopt methods derived by other approaches. Thus, in accordance with the expressionist and cognitivist views, «students writers explore [a] particular theme through journal writing, reading and discussion»²⁶, which is a way of developing critical thinking and providing a context for writing assignments. Students can also «learn what is appropriate in academic writing and what rhetorical strategies are available to them»²⁷ in line with writing for academic purposes. Moreover, the concept of focussing «on a main idea, developing support

²⁵ RUETTER 2003, p. XVI.

²⁶ IBIDEM, p. XVI.

²⁷ IBIDEM, p. XVI.

and organising a text»²⁸ is typical of the process approach, whereas the attention granted to «particular grammar points»²⁹ recalls concerns of controlled composition model.

3.1 ORGANISATION OF MY ENGLISH CLASSES ON WRITING SKILLS

My EFL course is addressed to first-year, predominantly Italian, students, who attend the School for Interpreters and Translators and study English as their third language. It is designed to achieve a B2 level and its classroom duration is of thirty hours, ten of which are devoted to writing skills. Each class lasts two hours.

Therefore, it is clear that my teaching, which is partly limited by time constraint, aims at providing students with a method in line with the learner's autonomy³⁰ and requires the students' collaborative participation.

My objectives derive from those listed in the *Common European Framework for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*, which stresses the importance of the interaction between writer and reader - «in written production (writing) activities the language user as writer produces a written text which is received by a readership of one or more readers»³¹ - and provides illustrative scales for overall written production; creative writing; reports and essays, as shown below.

	OVERALL WRITTEN PRODUCTION
B2	<i>Can write clear, detailed texts on a variety of subjects related to his/her field of interest, by linking a series of shorter discrete elements into a linear sequence.</i>

	CREATIVE WRITING
B2	<i>Can write, clear detailed descriptions of real or imaginary events and experiences, marking the relationship between ideas in clear connected texts, and following established conventions of the genre concerned.</i>
	<i>Can write clear detailed descriptions on a variety of subjects related to his/her field of interests. Can write a review of a film, book or play.</i>

²⁸ IBIDEM, p. XVI.

²⁹ IBIDEM, p. XVI.

³⁰ RANDACCIO 2009, pp. 105-107.

³¹ COUNCIL OF EUROPE 2001, p. 61.

	REPORTS AND ESSAYS
B2	<i><u>Can write an essay or report which develops an argument systematically with appropriate highlighting of significant points and relevant supporting details.</u></i> <i>Can evaluate different ideas or solutions to a problem.</i>
	<i><u>Can write an essay or report which develops an argument, giving reasons in support of or against a particular point of view and explaining the advantages and disadvantages of various options.</u></i> <i>Can synthesise information and arguments from a number of sources.</i>

The underlined ‘can do’ statements correspond to my detailed objectives, which are then organised according to a blended approach of process and current-traditional rhetoric writing. The material used is divided into five units:

1. THE PROCESS OF WRITING, THE STRUCTURE AND DEVELOPMENT OF A PARAGRAPH;
2. DESCRIPTIVE AND PROCESS PARAGRAPH;
3. COMPARISON/CONTRAST PARAGRAPH;
4. OPINION PARAGRAPH;
5. PROBLEM/SOLUTION PARAGRAPH.

As an example, the first unit will be illustrated. The students are made aware of the seven steps involved in the production of a piece of writing:

- 1) choosing a topic;
- 2) gathering ideas;
- 3) organising ideas;
- 4) writing;
- 5) reviewing structure and content;
- 6) revising structure and content;
- 7) making final corrections.

Emphasis is given to ‘pre-writing’, which includes step 1, 2 and 3 because reflection on content and its organisation helps students decide which will be the right focus for their piece of writing.

This reflection is achieved through various exercises such as narrowing down a topic and brainstorming, which may be divided into three different types: making a list, freewriting³² and mapping. For example, the topic ‘this town’ is too broad, therefore it must be narrowed down to ‘Coming to this town’. Here is an example taken from a student who chose to create a map:

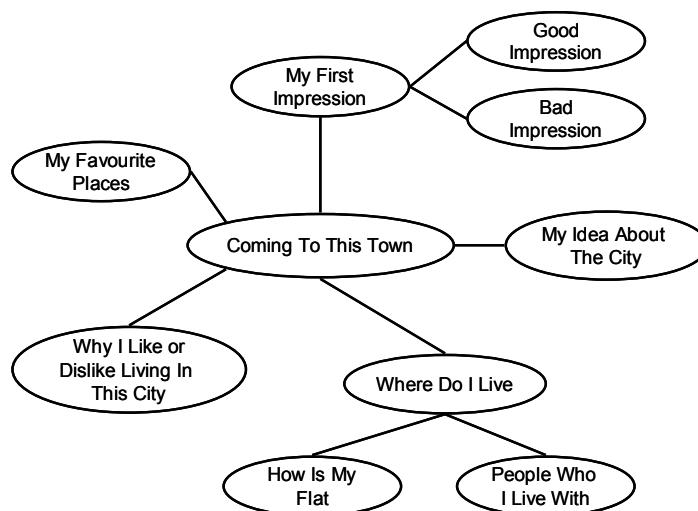


Figure 1. Map to describe the topic ‘Coming to this town’.

Second, sample paragraphs are used to illustrate paragraph structure. Thus, they can learn to single out the various components of a paragraph. The paragraph structure thus results in a *topic sentence*, which says *what the paragraph is about*, and a *controlling idea*, the writer’s attitude or idea about that topic.

The supporting part of the paragraph, *the supporting sentence*, explains or develops the topic sentence. According to the topic of the paragraph, the supporting sentences can give details, explanations or examples. Finally, *the concluding sentence* is usually a summary or a comment on the main idea expressed in the topic sentence.

³² When students are asked to ‘make a list’ they write single words, phrases, or sentences connected to their topic; when they ‘freewrite’, they write whatever comes to their mind about a topic, without stopping.

Students are also made familiar with notions such as *unity*, *coherence* and *cohesion*, which are characteristics of good paragraphs. In a unified paragraph, all the sentences relate to the topic and develop the controlling idea. In a coherent paragraph, the ideas are arranged logically: ideas and sentences are in an order that makes sense to the reader. In a cohesive paragraph, sentences are well-connected and the paragraph has a smooth flow so that one sentence leads easily into the next sentence.

Students are thus encouraged to leave out ideas unrelated to their topic, to organise a coherent sequence of their piece of writing, and use some cohesive devices such as anaphora and cataphora. They are also asked to concentrate their attention on those connecting phrases or words which show the relationship between ideas such as key words in sentences, coordinators, transitional words and subordinators.

Third, students are assigned a composition in order to execute what they have learned about the paragraph. Students are then asked to read in turn their compositions to the class, which will comment on the students' performance. In particular, the class should say whether:

- 1) the development of the paragraphs is consistent with the topic sentence;
- 2) the organisation of the composition is coherent or needs improvement;
- 3) the cohesive devices are used appropriately.

Finally, I make my own corrections to their compositions, which take into account various features relevant to the writing process, as shown in the diagram below.

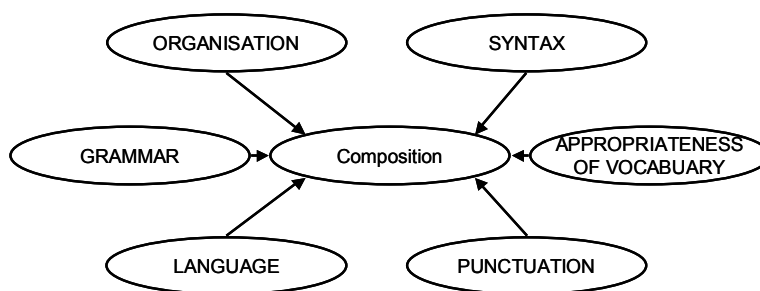


Figure 2. Features relevant to the writing process.

The diagram illustrates selected features of the composing process, not a complete analysis. For example, I have considered content less important for the purpose of my classes and privileged instead grammatical, syntactic and organisational correctness in my evaluation.

3.2. A CASE STUDY

I will now analyse a composition which was submitted by one of my students in the academic year 2010/2011. This composition represents an example of the average difficulties my students encounter in practicing writing skills.

In particular, I will focus on the various above-mentioned features (organisation, grammar, appropriateness of vocabulary, spoken language/written language, syntax and punctuation) and also try to explain how some recurring errors must be seen in the light of a wider issue: in fact, it has been noted that the influence of first language writing processes on second language writing processes plays a crucial role in L2 writing:

Topic: My country > The most important and beautiful cultural cities of Italy.
 From the artistic point of view, Italy is known as the richest country throughout the world and its beautiful cities testifies all its artistic heritage.
 The first city to talk about is definitely Rome, the capital. It was the first big metropolis, it was the heart of one of the most important civilisations that influenced society, culture, language, literature, art, architecture, philosophy, religion and customs of the following century: it was the capital of the Roman Empire. Nowadays Rome is actually the city with the highest concentration of historical possessions. It's a magic city which still conserves its ancient atmosphere and when you walk through

all its squares, fountains, monuments and churches, you feel like you're living in the past.

Then there's Naples, whose historical centre is one of the biggest in Europe. Its area houses a big number of castles, royal residences, monumental palaces, historical churches and rests of the classic ancientness. Even though its reputation in the world is not so good because of the underworld, from the artistic point of view, it's magnificent and cheerful city.

Venice is another of the most renowned Italian cities. It's one of the favourite tourist destinations of all-over-the-world travellers. This city «on the water» is one the most suggestive and romantic places and therefore it's for this reason that it's also known as a city of love; doing a sightseeing tour of the city on a gondola is the primary wish of lovers visiting Venice. This latter seems to be almost an unreal city, it's more similar to a landscape of fairy tales, an imaginary landscape and it's probably for this reason that it offers the perfect background to one of the most famous Carnivals.

In the centre of Italy we find another important city: Florence. Famous throughout the world thanks to its monuments and museums, it's universally recognized as one of the most important cradles of art and architecture. In the Italian literature it's seen as the city of culture par excellence. As a matter of fact, Florence was the place of origin of Italian Renaissance and the Florentine language is the official language of Italy.

As we can see, every mentioned city carries a piece of our country's history and traditions. Each one of them is an element which keep alive our origins.

The overall organisation of the composition is respected: the topic has been narrowed down, the topic sentence tells what the paragraphs are about (cities of Italy) and the controlling idea communicates the writer's attitude (the Italian artistic heritage is known all over the world). Each paragraph gives an example to support the topic (Rome, Naples, Venice, Florence) and the concluding sentence comments on the main idea of the topic sentence (the importance of Rome, Naples, Venice and Florence for Italian history and traditions).

Grammar is sometimes incorrect: *throughout the world* > in the world (line 1); *testifies* > testify to (line 2); *the Italian literature* > Italian literature (line 23); *Italian Renaissance* > the Italian Renaissance (line 24); *each one of them* > each (line 27); *keep alive our origins* > keeps our origins alive (line 28).

Inappropriateness of vocabulary and expression are often found, as, for example, in 'the first city to talk about' > 'the first city I will consider'; 'actually' > 'actually'; 'possessions' > 'landmarks'; 'walk through all its squares, fountains, monuments and churches' > 'to visit its squares, fountains, monuments and churches'; 'underworld' > 'criminal underworld'; 'all-over-the-world travellers' > 'travellers from all over the

world'; '*one of the most famous Carnivals*' > 'one of the most famous Carnivals in the world'.

There is also the use of some expressions typical of spoken language; *there's* > there is (line 10); *it's* > it is (line 13, 14, 16, 18, 19, 23); *As we can see* > In conclusion (line 26). However, it is in the cumulative effect of errors in syntax, punctuation and vocabulary that the analysis of this composition becomes more interesting: in fact, this analysis reveals students' uncertainty in handling the composition process as well as the interference of L1 on L2 in their writing.

For example, at a syntactic level, sentences tend to be very long and have the prosody of Italian writing:

It was the first big metropolis, it was the heart of one of the most important civilisations that influenced society, culture, language, literature, art, architecture, philosophy, religion and customs of the following century: it was the capital of the Roman Empire.

In these sentences there are some unnecessary repetitions (*it was...*) and a colon which is not followed by an explanation as is usually the case in English (... : *it was the capital of the Roman Empire*). Punctuation is also used as in written Italian:

This latter seems to be almost an unreal city, it's more similar to a landscape of fairy tales, an imaginary landscape and it's probably for this reason that it offers the perfect background to one of the most famous Carnivals.

Here the two coordinate clauses might have been two separate sentences (...similar to a landscape of fairy tales, an imaginary landscape. It's probably for this reason...). At word level, there are many examples of calques from the Italian: 'historical possessions' > 'historical site'; 'rests of classic ancientness' > 'the remains of classic antiquity'; 'suggestive' > 'impressive'.

4. CONCLUSIONS

From the case study shown above, there are three main areas which have proven problematic and raise relevant issues that must be tackled in teaching writing

skills. The difficulties highlighted in the composition which has been analysed concern to start the area of grammar, the area of the composition process and, finally, the area in which the relationship between L1 and L2 writing is negotiated. The improvement of grammar in writing skills has been at the core of a debate that has lasted more than thirty years. In the 1980s, proponents of methods such as Terrell's *Natural Approach*, Asher's *Total Physical Response* or Lozanov's *Suggestopedia*, considered that the question of grammar had to be solved in a holistic approach rooted in second language acquisition theory.

Second language acquisition theory makes a distinction between language *acquisition*, which is a subconscious process similar to child first language acquisition, and language *learning*, a more conscious process, less powerful and central than acquisition. According to second language acquisition theory, therefore, grammar cannot be thought 'in sequence', i.e., one aspect of grammar at the time (e.g. a lesson on the present tense, followed by a lesson on the future tense, etc.) and conscious rule-learning has no longer a central role.

From this point of view, writing ability is thus the result of extensive reading in which the focus of the reader is on the message: all the necessary grammatical structure and discourse rules for writing will be automatically acquired from reading.

Although the role of grammar has been underestimated for many years, it must be remembered that grammar has at least three important functions in teaching writing skills:

- 1) it plays a crucial role in the final stage of a composing process because it is there that the use of the conscious knowledge of grammar to fill in the gaps left by acquisition is most needed;
- 2) grammar provides students with the information about the structure of language, a conscious linguistic reflection which allows comparison of similarities and differences among languages;

3) grammar allows students to be acquainted with the structure of written discourse, its rules and its rhetorical models, which differ from language to language and can create certain kinds of miscommunication³³.

Difficulties inherent to the composition process are mainly due to two reasons: the lack of acquisition of the code, e. g., written English, and a poor or inefficient composing process.

Krashen proposes possible solutions which are intended to solve both problems. Thus, for those who have not acquired the code, i.e., have not a feel for what good writing reads like and tend to use, and often over-use, conscious rules in writing, he suggests they should instead concentrate on content revisions and delay editing changes until the last draft.

Another solution concerns «the transformation from writer-based prose to reader-based prose»³⁴, according to which the writer develops the critical skill of being able to organise what he knows with a reader in mind.

Krashen concludes with very practical advice which summarises how the composing process must be carried out:

- 1) Have at least a rough outline or plan before you begin to write...
- 2) Don't over-edit early drafts...
- 3) Keep the whole composition in mind as you write»³⁵.

Finally, the analysis conducted in the case study shows a tendency in L2 writing which both students and teachers must be aware of if they aim at improving writing skills. This tendency is the influence of L1 writing on L2 writing, which has been the object of many studies, as Krapels³⁶ and Friedlander³⁷ show.

³³ KRASHEN 1984, pp. 35-36.

³⁴ IBIDEM, p. 32.

³⁵ IBIDEM, p. 34.

³⁶ KRAPELS 1990, pp. 37-56.

³⁷ FRIEDLANDER 1990, pp. 109-125.

Among the many, sometimes contradictory, research findings³⁸, there are various aspects which must be taken into consideration in order to investigate this issue. In particular, the attention has moved from early studies which focussed on similarities between L1 and L2 composing to more recent studies documenting their differences.

Thus, the interaction of first and second languages and cultures in L2 writing has become the most promising and valuable field of research, together with the study of the role that contrasting rhetorical preferences play in the L2 composing process.

Therefore, there are questions that cannot be left unanswered and invite serious reflections, such as

- does the fact that some second language writers seems to depend more on first language use than others depends on individual preferences or is due to external factors?
- Do L1 rhetorical preferences have any impact on L2 writing?
- What is the role of writing in students' native cultures and in their lives, and does this role affect L2 writing process?
- Does the writer's cultural background, especially the writer's education in an L1 environment, influence L1 use in L2 composing?³⁹

Far from being exhaustive, the solutions and reflection proposed in the area of grammar of the composition process and of the relationship between L1 and L2 writing witness that, because much has still to be demonstrated, they constitute an extremely promising field of research full of potential.

³⁸ KRAPELS 1990, pp. 49-50.

³⁹ IBIDEM, p. 52.

REFERENCES

BERLIN J. A.

1982, *Contemporary composition: The major pedagogical theories*, «College English», n. 44, pp. 765-777.

1987, *Rhetoric and reality: Writing instruction in American colleges, 1900-1985*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press.

1988, *Rhetoric and ideology in the writing class*, «College English», n. 50, pp. 477-494.

COUNCIL OF EUROPE

2001, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

EDE L., LUNSFORD A.

1984, *Audience addressed, audience invoked: The role of audience in composition theory and pedagogy*, «College Composition and Communication», n. 35, pp. 155-171.

FLOWER L.

1979, *Writer-based prose: A cognitive basis for problems in writing*, «College English», n. 41, pp. 19-38.

1998, *Problem-solving Strategies for Writing*, Fort Worth, Harcourt Brace.

FRIEDLANDER A.

1990, *Composing in English: effects of a first language on writing in English as a second language*, in KROLL B. (ed.), *Second Language Writing. Research insights for the classroom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 109-125.

FRIES C.

1945, *Teaching and Learning English as a Second language*, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press.

HOROWITZ D.

1986, *Process not product: Less than meets the eye*, «TESOL Quarterly», n. 20, pp. 141-144.

JOHNS A. M.

1990, *L1 composition theories: implication for developing theories of L2 composition*, in KROLL B. (ed.), *Second Language Writing. Research insights for the classroom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 24-36.

KAPLAN R.

1966, *Cultural thought pattern in intercultural education*, «Language Learning», n. 16, pp. 1-20.

KRAPELS A. R.

1990, *An overview of second language writing process*, in KROLL B. (ed.), *Second Language Writing. Research insights for the classroom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 37-56.

KRASHEN S. D.

1984, *Writing. Research, Theory and Applications*, Pergamon Press, Oxford.

MILLER J., JUDY S.

1978, *Writing and reality*, New York, Harper & Row.

NYSTRAND M.

1986, *The structure of written communication: Studies in reciprocity between writers and readers*, Orlando, Academic Press.

RAIMES A.

1983, *Techniques in Teaching Writing*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

RANDACCIO M.

2009, *Portfolio: valutazione, autovalutazione e autonomia del discente*, in GORI F. (a cura di), *Il Portfolio delle Lingue nell'Università italiana: studenti e autonomia*, Trieste, EUT.

REID J.

1984, *The radical outliner and the radical brainstormer: A perspective on composing processes*, «TESOL Quarterly», n. 18, pp. 529-533.

RIVERS W.

1968, *Teaching Foreign Language Skills*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

RUETTEN M. K.

2003, *Developing Composition Skills: Rhetoric and Grammar*, Boston, Heinle.

SILVA T.

1990, *Second language composition instruction: developments, issues, and directions in ESL*, in KROLL B. (ed.), *Second Language Writing. Research insights for the classroom*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 11-23.

SWALES J.

1990, *Genre analysis: English in academic and research setting*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

ZEMACH D. E., RUMISEK L. A.

2003, *Academic Writing: from paragraph to essay*, London, Macmillan.