# Second Language Writing Ability:
# Towards a Complete Construct Definition

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore the construct of second language (L2) writing ability within the context of large-scale writing assessment. As L2 writing theory is based in part on the previously established field of first language (L1) writing, I provide a brief discussion of seminal contributions from this related field before summarizing and critiquing a few early L2 writing studies. This discussion includes the process-product debate in writing research and identifies the inadequacies of applying L1 process definitions to a construct definition of L2 writing ability. After drawing a distinction between L2 and L1 writing ability, I summarize several empirical studies in L2 writing research, noting how these contribute to our current understanding of the nature of the construct. I conclude by suggesting what remains to be explored in the quest for a more complete construct definition of L2 writing ability. Specifically, I claim that a complete model of L2 writing ability must indicate (a) how L2 writing ability is distinct from other types of L2 knowledge, and (b) how L2 proficiency and writing ability interact.

## INTRODUCTION

Large-scale writing assessment in post-secondary education in the United States is not only prevalent, but on the rise. Evidence of this is the recent addition of a direct writing component to the College Board's SAT[2] exam, "perhaps the most important change in the test's history" (National Council of Teachers of English, 2005, p. 1), as well as the College Board's new Accuplacer WriterPlacer® for essay assessments. Research in second language writing in particular is also increasing, as indicated by the establishment in 2005 of a new interest section exclusively for second language writing by the TESOL professional organization.

The purposes of large-scale writing assessments vary. In some cases, these assessments may contribute to research in writing theory, encourage positive washback in instruction (Fader, 1986; Hamp-Lyons, 2003), or increase writing teachers' "political clout" (Conlan, 1986, p. 111). The most common purpose of writing assessment, however, is to collect information for making inferences about test-takers' writing ability (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Weigle, 2002). Since

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[2] The SAT exam, formerly called the Scholastic Aptitude Test and Scholastic Assessment Test, is a type of standardized test frequently used by colleges and universities in the U.S. to aid in the selection of incoming students.

these inferences become the basis for decisions about test-takers—decisions which, in some cases, may be high stakes—it is critical that assessments be based on a sound understanding of what they purport to measure.

Whatever the intended purposes of a large-scale writing assessment, there is the assumption that such tests are rooted in a widely accepted or unified theory, founded on a clearly defined notion of what writing is (Leki, 1995). As educational assessment theorists argue, "every assessment, regardless of its purpose, rests on … a model of how students represent knowledge and develop competence" (Pellegrino, Chudowsky, & Glaser, 2001, p. 2). Indeed, for any assessment, test developers must be able to describe the ability or knowledge that their test aims to assess. When it comes to testing writing, however, construct clarity remains elusive. In fact, "although educators around the world regularly work with implicit understandings of what constitutes effective English writing, no existing research or testing programs have proposed or verified a specific model of this, such as would be universally accepted" (Cumming, Kantor, Powers, Santos, & Taylor, 2000, p. 27). This lack of a unified theory of writing ability has been noted in both first and second language writing research (Huot, 1990; Kroll, 2003).

As a latent trait, writing ability, "cannot be seen but ha[s] to be measured by capturing some examples of behavior that tap that construct" (Hamp-Lyons, 2003, p. 165). In assessment theory, construct validity is one of the essential elements to consider when determining a test's usefulness, for without construct validity, the value of test scores and the claims one may make based on these scores are compromised (Bachman & Palmer, 1996). Indeed, "testing compels us … to develop and refine our definitions of good writing" (Greenberg, Weiner, & Donovan, 1986, p. xiv). For large-scale assessments, where tests are not based on a particular syllabus, course, or curriculum, test designers must rely on a theory-based construct definition (Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Weigle, 2002). This is not to say that such definitions are merely theoretical; indeed, one goal of research in testing is to build theoretical descriptions founded on empirical evidence (Pellegrino et al., 2001).

In this paper, I explore the construct of L2 writing ability within the context of large-scale assessment by examining both theoretical arguments and empirical studies on this topic. Through this review of the literature, I aim to arrive at the necessary components for a construct definition of L2 writing ability. I begin by highlighting the lack of agreement as to the nature of this ability, along with the imbalance between theory and practice. As L2 writing theory is based in part on the previously established field of L1 writing, I provide a brief discussion of seminal contributions from this related field before summarizing and critiquing a few early L2 writing studies. This discussion includes the process-product debate in writing research and identifies the inadequacies of applying L1 process definitions to a construct definition of L2 writing ability. After differentiating L2 and L1 writing ability, I summarize several empirical studies in L2 writing research to illustrate how they contribute to our current understanding of the nature of L2 writing ability. I then describe two very promising models of L2 writing ability that draw on research in both L1 and L2 writing, but which still leave a few questions unanswered. I conclude by suggesting what remains to be explored in the quest for a more complete construct definition of L2 writing ability.

# DEFINING L2 WRITING ABILITY

Currently, writing experts agree that any credible writing assessment requires test takers to produce a sample of writing (Carlson & Bridgeman, 1986; Conlan, 1986; Greenberg et al., 1986; Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Hamp-Lyons, 2003; Huot, 1990; McNamara, 1996; Tsai, 2004; Weigle, 2002). That is, the direct method of text production has replaced indirect methods such as multiple choice, cloze, and sentence completion tasks as the preferred means for assessing writing ability. The growing popularity of performance-based assessments and evolving statistical procedures for evaluating them are further indications of the demand for direct testing methods (Bond & Fox, 2001; McNamara, 1996).

Despite this consensus by researchers on how best to elicit writing ability, there is little agreement "about the skills and processes that constitute 'writing'" (Greenberg et al., 1986, p. xi). In fact, writing ability ranges in meaning "from the merest handwriting or spelling measure to a requirement for a thesis statement" (White, 1986, p. 55). This is not to say that there is little research on writing assessment practices, methods, or even models. Indeed, there is an extensive body of literature on these and other aspects of writing assessment (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996; Huot, 1990; Silva, 1993). A review of this literature reveals, however, that practice and theory have not developed in tandem. The demands for effective and efficient practices have dominated the field without the concurrent development of theory to ground such assessments (Cumming et al., 2000; Huot, 1990; Kroll, 2003). As a result, while writing assessment practices can be said to have evolved considerably over the past several decades, there is little theoretical confirmation of what defines writing ability, even as assessments of writing ability appear to be increasing.

## Foundations of L2 Writing Theory: L1 Writing Research

Because L2 writing theory has only recently been recognized as a field in its own right (Kroll, 2003), those initially engaged in L2 writing theory relied on the established disciplines of applied linguistics and composition for model-building and teaching practices (Matsuda, 2003; Silva & Leki, 2004). Since in applied linguistics the developing notion of communicative language ability placed more emphasis on spoken than written language, L2 writing practitioners necessarily turned to L1 composition research for direction. Consequently, any discussion of L2 writing ability must necessarily begin with a summary of contributions from L1 writing theory.

One of the earliest attempts to define the construct of writing ability based on research is described in Flower and Hayes' (1980) seminal article. The goal of this study was to examine the processes writers engaged in when completing a writing task. This study is considered a landmark in writing research because, rather than focus on the written products of their participants, Flower and Hayes observed differences in participants' behavior during the process of writing to discover what successful writers do as they compose a piece of writing. Furthermore, by defining the task as a *problem*, Flower and Hayes recognized that writing ability depends in part on the task situation. To make their behavior more observable, participants verbalized their thoughts while completing writing tasks, a procedure known as the think-aloud protocol. This study was one of the first to use this method of data collection for writing research. Another innovative aspect of this study was that the authors selected participants according to their level of writing ability: students who had gone to seek help for their writing were categorized as unskilled writers, and writing teachers were selected as skilled writers to whom the unskilled writers could be compared. Flower and Hayes found that, overall, skilled

writers spent more time thinking about the *rhetorical problem* and their audience while unskilled writers used their time mainly to generate text, without much concern for the reader of that text. This and similar studies led Flower and Hayes (1981) to advance their "cognitive process theory" in which they described writing as a set of "goal-directed" "thinking processes" (p. 366), organized according to a hierarchical structure.

The recognition that writing is not a linear process, but iterative and hierarchical in nature, has had an immense impact on writing practice, with revision and editing now essential elements in most writing courses. More importantly, the shift in focus from written products to writers' processes initiated a major paradigm shift in writing pedagogy, and process-based approaches soon replaced most other forms of writing instruction (Ferris, 2002). Concerning writing theory, however, contributions from the work of Flower and Hayes (1980, 1981) have been either understated or overlooked. Specifically, the use of think-aloud protocols allowed Flower and Hayes (1980) to seek empirical data on which to build a theoretical model. Unfortunately, the questionable validity of this data collection method (Cooper & Holzman, 1983; Hyland, 2002) may have overshadowed the value of their attempts to ground their theory in observable data. Additionally, while not the focus of their studies, the inclusion of both skilled and unskilled writers raised the suggestion that writing ability may involve a developmental dimension, which could be examined by observing writers at different levels of ability. Finally, while the writing process was, indeed, a key element in Flower and Hayes' (1980, 1981) research, many practitioners failed to understand that *process* in these studies referred to cognitive, or mental processes (such as those related to task demands and long-term memory), and not steps that successful writers might engage in while completing a writing assignment (such as prewriting and revision). In sum, early research by Flower and Hayes provided researchers with a useful model from which to build a more complete theory, yet the practical aspects of their work (however misinterpreted) seem to have had a greater impact than the theory-building aspects – a prime example of how practice has tended to take precedence over theory in the field of writing.

Continuing this line of research into the nature of L1 writing from a cognitive psychology perspective, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) also focused on multiple writing levels. Unlike Flower and Hayes (1980, 1981), who looked at skilled and unskilled writers, Bereiter and Scardamalia considered the differences between easy and difficult tasks, hypothesizing that these might best be defined by different cognitive properties. Based on close to 120 empirical studies conducted over eight years, the authors proposed two models of composing, where "one model makes writing a fairly natural task [and] the other model makes writing a task that keeps growing in complexity to match the expanding competence of the writer" (p. 5). The first of these models they labeled *knowledge telling*; the more complex one they referred to as *knowledge transforming*. According to Bereiter and Scardamalia, knowledge telling is "a naturally acquired ability, common to almost everyone," while knowledge transforming is "a more studied ability involving skills that not everyone acquires" and which involves "deliberate, strategic control over parts of the process that are unattended to in the more naturally developed ability" (p. 6). While such concepts may be relevant to a discussion of L1 writing, their limitations surface when examined in reference to L2 writers. Descriptions such as "natural" and "common to almost everyone" (p. 5) may be useful for describing the construct of L1 writing ability, but such a portrayal ignores the experience of L2 learners who will not find knowledge telling in their L2 to be "natural" or effortless. Indeed, L2 writers often struggle and apply "deliberate, strategic control" (p. 6), even when not using the knowledge transforming model. Despite the limited

applicability of Bereiter and Scardamalia's research to L2 writers, their discussion is useful for constructing a complete definition of writing ability.

To summarize, where Flower and Hayes (1980, 1981) offered insight into potential distinctions between skilled and unskilled writers, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) provided a useful mechanism for potentially discriminating easy from difficult tasks, or lower-order from higher-order approaches to completing a writing task. Although these models were proposed with L1 writers in mind, and thus have limitations when applied to L2 writers, the perspectives they included are essential to a complete model of writing proficiency. What these models failed to address, from an L2 perspective, is the role of linguistic knowledge in writing ability. However complex they were, these models assumed writers' access to grammatical knowledge is roughly equivalent, yet for L2 learners, this is not the case, as they are still developing their knowledge of the L2 linguistic code. In the case of L2 writing ability, what is stored in long-term or working memory may vary according to one's control over the medium of writing, and not just knowledge of the topic. Lacking an alternative, however, early L2 writing researchers relied on such L1 studies for an initial research agenda.

## From L1 to L2 Writing Research

Investigations into the nature of L1 writing offered L2 writing specialists research paradigms lacking in L2 studies (Hamp-Lyons & Kroll, 1997). More specifically, L1 writing theory made the following contributions to L2 writing research: (1) provided the idea of distinguishing between novice and expert writers in an attempt to accurately describe the behavior of more advanced writers, (2) suggested data collection techniques that could allow researchers to ground theory in empirical data, and (3) illustrated the many cognitive processes involved in producing a piece of writing. Also attractive for many L2 writing specialists was the shift from a focus on written products to writers' processes, leading L2 researchers to look for evidence of similarities between L1 and L2 writing abilities (Johns, 1995).

Zamel (1982), for instance, sought confirmation for the idea that writing in an L2 context could also be described as a "process of discovery" (p. 195). Following a case-study approach, the author interviewed and studied the writing behavior of eight proficient L2 writers from a variety of L2 backgrounds (with *proficient* defined as a student no longer in ESL courses). The results of this study are difficult to summarize as they lack any quantitative analysis, yet Zamel concluded, "it is quite clear that ESL writers … use strategies similar to those used by native speakers of English" (p. 203). Concerning pedagogic implications, Zamel added that learners' behaviors "suggest approaches to the teaching of composition that ESL teachers may have felt were only appropriate for native speakers but which, in fact, may be effective for teaching all levels of writing, including ESL composition" (p. 203). Thus, for Zamel, this study confirmed the appropriateness of applying L1 writing research to L2 writing practice. In a later study including observations in addition to interviews, Zamel (1983) reached similar conclusions, leading her to discourage L2 writing teachers from focusing prematurely on linguistic accuracy since communication was more important.

While there are several limitations to these early studies (e.g., the operationalization of proficiency, lack of direct observations, no control for L1 differences, and a focus only on advanced writers), they have considerable historical importance in L2 writing research. In fact, Zamel's (1982, 1983) articles are often cited as two of the earliest studies to compare L2 writing ability with L1 research results. More importantly, these studies are perhaps best known for

marking the transition from a focus on L2 learners' written products to their writing processes. Consequently, Zamel's (1982, 1983) work helped spark the enduring debate on process versus product in L2 writing research and pedagogy.

Consistent with the trend in L1 writing research, early L2 writing studies were valued more for the influence they had on L2 writing practice than for their theoretical contributions. This is not to say that all L2 writing practitioners accepted Zamel's (1982, 1983) conclusions without criticism, especially with regard to the appropriateness of adopting an L1 process approach. In fact, several researchers noted inadequacies of the process approach when applied to L2 learners (Eskey, 1983; Horowitz, 1991; Johns, 1986). As Johns (1986) stated, "we may be doing our students a disservice by strictly adhering to all tenets of this approach, for it must be examined in light of the tasks which students are required to perform" (p. 231). Horowitz (1991) concurred with Johns' criticism of the process approach for its lack of address of many L2 students' needs, specifically the need to produce in-class essays. Many practicing L2 instructors also pointed out that there may be differences between the students in their classes and those in native-speaker composition classes addressed by L1 researchers in their development of process writing approaches (Ferris, 2002).

These observations by L2 researchers and practitioners drew attention to the fact that, useful as L1 writing models were as starting points, they were inadequate for a complete construct definition of L2 writing ability. More importantly, the process-product division forced L2 writing specialists to examine the nature of L2 writing in more depth, to determine how similar or different it was from L1 composition, and to begin to formulate a theory of L2 writing ability distinct from L1 writing. In short, researchers and practitioners began to realize that what is construct-relevant for L1 writing may not be so for L2 writing ability; likewise, there may be aspects considered construct-irrelevant for L1 writers which cannot be overlooked in a model of L2 writing ability.

One of the most noticeable differences between L1 and L2 writing ability is the role of linguistic competence. Although not all L1 writers have equivalent abilities for expressing themselves, nor the same degree of lexical development, as native speakers they have already acquired the linguistic code needed to form grammatically correct sentences. That is, for L1 writers, grammatical ability is not a major focus of analysis. Additionally, L1 writers may have tacit knowledge of cultural expectations for a text's organization (Kaplan, 1966). L2 writers, on the other hand, are often still developing their proficiency in the L2, making grammatical form as demanding as content. Moreover, many L2 writers – especially those who have advanced literacy in their L1 – may be accustomed to textual organizational patterns quite different from those commonly used in the L2 (Kaplan, 1966). Thus, while the field of L1 composition could provide a foundation for the writing component of L2 writing research, it was unable to adequately address these and other factors related to the "second language" nature of L2 writing. For this, L2 writing researchers needed to turn to their other "parent" discipline (Silva & Leki, 2004), that of applied linguistics.

## Foundations of L2 Writing Theory: L2 Studies

Despite the lack of priority given to the skill of writing in applied linguistics research, by the time the field of L2 writing emerged as an independent discipline, researchers in applied linguistics had already developed detailed models of language ability lacking in L1 studies. For example, Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) had proposed models of language ability

based on developments in linguistic and sociolinguistic theory, and underlying the practice of communicative language teaching. Bachman (1990), and later Bachman and Palmer (1996), continued this line of research, providing more specific definitions of communicative language ability. Specifically, Bachman and Palmer proposed that language ability is comprised of two main parts, namely language competence and strategic competence. Language competence is further divided into two distinct types of knowledge: organizational and pragmatic. Organizational knowledge refers to the linguistic aspects of an utterance or text, that is, the grammatical (lexical, syntactic, and phonological/graphical) elements along with awareness of cohesion and rhetorical organization markers. Pragmatic knowledge, in contrast, includes the functions of utterances and the language user's sociolinguistic knowledge, or how the context affects the interpretation of an utterance. The other main part of communicative language ability, strategic competence, includes nonlinguistic cognitive factors that are instrumental in language use, including in test-taking situations.

An important aspect of Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model is the interaction across both linguistic and nonlinguistic components during actual language use, allowing for the construct definition to include not only different types of knowledge that make up language ability, but also a learner's capacity to implement this knowledge appropriately in specific contexts. The recognition that these components can influence the language user to differing degrees makes this model particularly attractive for testing purposes since it illustrates how test performance is a factor of all these components combined. In sum, by including nonlinguistic and external factors as part of communicative language ability, Bachman and Palmer's model provides a more complete account of what language ability is and how an L2 learner's performance can be measured. It should be noted, however, that for Bachman and Palmer, L2 writing ability is not a unique skill, but rather "the contextualized realization of the ability to use language in the performance of a specific language use task" (pp. 75-76).

Though not developed specifically for writing ability, what models of communicative language ability make evident is that a definition of L2 writing ability must account for grammatical knowledge, sociolinguistic knowledge, discourse knowledge, and strategic competence, all of which "are essential for writing" (Weigle, 2002, p. 29), and areas in which L2 writers often lack proficiency (Leki, 1992). Indeed, many L2 writers may be skilled writers in their L1s; thus, it is often their linguistic development that distinguishes them from L1 writers (Silva, 1997). For this reason, any model that excludes linguistic aspects (such as models based primarily on L1 writing ability) disregards a large part of what constitutes L2 writing ability.

While research into the nature of communicative language ability has offered insights into linguistic needs of L2 writers, the lack of attention to writing in L2 studies, coupled with L2 practitioners' later dissatisfaction with the process movement in L1 composition, compelled L2 writing researchers to develop their own line of research. Consequently, L2 writing began to mature into an independent field, with its own research questions, emerging theories, and publications (Kroll, 2003), all of which generated more research on the nature of L2 writing ability. In the following section, I will summarize a few empirical studies focused exclusively on defining L2 writing ability.

## Building a Model of L2 Writing Ability: L2 Empirical Studies

In recent years, the number of empirical studies of L2 writing has increased "exponentially" (Polio, 2003, p. 35), yet given the preference for practice over theory, many

studies address pedagogical questions and are less focused on defining the construct of L2 writing ability. Thus, the empirical studies described here were selected for their focus on the nature of L2 writing ability and their potential to contribute to a construct definition.

Though some early L2 studies followed research traditions from L1 studies, focusing on processes more than products, many others recognized the value of examining written products as a means to capturing developing L2 writers' behavior. Like Zamel (1982, 1983), Raimes (1987) observed the composing processes of ESL writers at different levels of proficiency to compare their strategies with L1 writers. In contrast to Zamel's work, however, Raimes observed students' written products as well as processes, recognizing that these written products are a valuable source of data in theory-building for L2 writing ability. Following the research tradition from L1 studies, Raimes elicited think-aloud protocols from eight ESL students (four in remedial ESL writing courses and four in college-level writing courses) as they responded to two different tasks. Raimes then compared the analyses from these tasks with students' holistic placement results, holistic writing evaluations, and language proficiency test scores in order to look for relationships between language proficiency and writing ability. Based on data from this limited number of participants, the author found little correlation between students' L2 proficiency, writing ability, and composing strategies, and noted that L2 writers were similar to less skilled L1 writers in that neither group spent much time on prewriting activities, such as planning. Conversely, Raimes found students in the nonremedial courses engaged more with their developing texts, that is, spending more time planning, scanning, and revising. These results led Raimes to conclude, as Zamel (1982, 1983) had, that L1 teaching techniques were appropriate for L2 writers. However, she specified that L2 writers, "in addition to lacking linguistic proficiency in L2, might also lack writing ability in their L1; lack knowledge of conventions of L2 written products; and lack practice in generating and organizing ideas in L2 for an L2 reader" (Raimes, 1987, p. 461).

Though Raimes' (1987) study had obvious limitations (e.g., too few participants, problematic operationalization of writing proficiency, and lack of attention to L1 differences), her study was a pivotal one. Raimes' attempt to ground L2 writing theory in observable data and with replicable procedures, such as observations, interviews, test scores from multiple tests, trained raters, multiple tasks, and students at different levels of writing proficiency, identifies this study as a valuable contribution to theory development in L2 writing ability and reflects developing standards in the emerging field of L2 writing research.

Regarding the relationship between language proficiency and L2 writing ability, Cumming (1989) noted that much of the research in L2 writing "implicitly confounded" (p. 86) writing expertise and L2 proficiency. In addition, Cumming observed that most L2 writing research at that time was limited by the small numbers of participants involved and researchers' lack of control for L1, age, culture, and educational background. To address some of these issues, all participants in Cumming's study shared the same L1 (French), culture (Canadian), and educational background, and were roughly the same age. Using a 3 x 2 x 3 factorial design, where 23 participants represented three different levels of L1 writing ability and two levels of L2 proficiency in completing three tasks, Cumming observed how L1 writing expertise and L2 proficiency interacted with L2 composing skills. Based on his analysis of the quality of the L2 compositions and the composing strategies participants revealed in think-aloud observations, Cumming found that participants "simply enacted composing strategies, characteristic of their mother-tongue expertise, in their second language" (p. 121), leading to the conclusion that "writing expertise and second-language proficiency accounted for large, but distinctly *separate*,

portions of the variance" (p. 118). Cumming added, "these analyses indicate that writing expertise and second-language proficiency each make quite different contributions to the processes and products of writing in a second language" making the two activities "psychologically different" (p. 118). The author specified that an increase in L2 proficiency will assist an L2 learner to produce better writing in the L2, and a minimum threshold of L2 proficiency is necessary for L2 writing ability, yet greater proficiency will not necessarily lead to greater writing ability. In a later article, Cumming (1995) suggests that the independent skill of writing ability may have a greater influence on L2 writing than L2 proficiency has on L2 writing. In other words, L2 proficiency and writing ability are related, yet distinct, and instruction that focuses only on L2 proficiency may not assist learners in developing their L2 writing ability. Moreover, some L2 writers may not need instruction in writing, since they already possess advanced composing strategies transferable from their L1, but they may need other types of L2 instruction and practice in the L2. These observations and conclusions suggest that any definition of L2 writing ability should allow for the separability of writing expertise and L2 proficiency.

While Raimes' (1987) and Cumming's (1989) studies helped develop standards in L2 writing research, they still viewed L2 writing through comparisons to aspects of L1 writing ability. Gradually, researchers began to use these comparisons between L1 and L2 writers not as defining aspects of L2 writing ability, but to form more precise questions as to the nature of L2 writing ability. For instance, Ruetten (1991) proposed that ability to use rhetorical features may not coincide with grammatical ability for L2 writers, a question that would be irrelevant in L1 composition given L1 writers' native speaker grammatical competence. To investigate this possibility, Reutten selected 17 problematical ESL placement essays that had required a third reader's judgment (instead of two) for providing a holistic score. After discarding eight essays for various reasons, nine remaining essays were identified as displaying a noticeable discrepancy between rhetorical control (e.g., organization, coherence, development) and grammatical control (e.g., sentence structure, verb control, use of articles and prepositions). Five of these nine essays were considered to display greater rhetorical than grammatical control, while the other four showed the reverse. Reutten believed that it was precisely this imbalance of writing subskills that had led to the scoring discrepancies in these essays, for they "defy our expectations in some way" (p. 43). Additionally, Ruetten suggested that certain features of the text – rhetorical or linguistic – may interact differently with different raters, leading to different ratings for the same essay. Despite the obvious limitations of this study, including the limited sample size and the fact that all essays were evaluated and described by just one rater, this study pointed out that L2 writing often exhibits discrepancies not found in L1 writing, and thus provides empirical support for the distinction between the two processes and products. A complete definition of L2 writing ability should aim to account for these discrepancies, for it may be that certain features are typical of learners at certain stages of L2 writing development. In fact, it is possible that what may be considered atypical writing behavior for L1 writers is actually quite typical in the development of L2 writers at a particular level.

Another study investigating the nature of L2 writing ability from a rater's perspective is Leki (1995). The participants in this study (20 ESL university students, 8 ESL writing teachers, 7 teachers of L1 students, and 14 content area teachers from a variety of university disciplines) were asked to read, rank, and discuss their reactions to four ESL student essays to see what participants believed defined good writing. In particular, the teachers were asked to rank the essays as they would in their courses, and the student participants were asked to rank each essay three times: once according to their own preferences, a second time for how they thought their

English teachers would rank them, and a third time for how they thought a teacher from another discipline would rank them. The results from each of the four essays were then analyzed by looking at how many readers selected a particular essay as the best, second best, and so forth. Unfortunately, it is impossible to analyze the participants' preferences for specific features of language since the essays were all rewritten to correct for spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors before they were given to the participants. This was done in order to focus on "macro features of the texts" and still "permit the flavor of the original to show through as much as possible" (Leki, 1995, p. 26), but it constitutes one of the greatest limitations of the study. While this manipulation of the essays, along with a lack of statistical analyses, make the results somewhat difficult to interpret, the qualitative findings are interesting. In general, the students' opinions differed from the faculty's, and the faculty raters agreed that essay organization and strong introductions were important, but could not agree on what a strong introduction was. This study illustrates the need to consider organizational features in a definition of L2 writing ability, as well as the difficulty in recognizing and defining the features of good L2 writing, even by those often engaged in essay writing (students) and evaluation (teachers).

Another empirical study that looked at rhetorical features of essay products by L2 writers is by Tedick and Mathison (1995). In this study, 25 student participants (10 beginners, 10 intermediate, and 5 advanced) each wrote two essays on the same two prompts, one with a general topic and one a field-specific topic. The 50 essays were then rated on two rhetorical features: "framing" and "elements of task compliance" (Tedick & Mathison, 1995, p. 205), where framing referred to how well a writer provided sufficient context and development, defined operationally by how well six readers could detect the topic of the essay and predict the essay's development based on just the first paragraph. (A more commonly used term to define this feature might be topic identification and development.) The motivation for selecting framing as a key feature was based on the assumption that well-framed essays may assist readers, and therefore lead to higher scores. The second feature, task compliance, concerned how well participants included elements of the task in their responses. To investigate this part of the study, the two prompts were examined to determine which elements were necessary for successful completion of the task, such as a definition, a position statement, support, or examples. The researchers then examined each of the 50 essays to identify which of these elements were present. All essays were scored holistically and statistical procedures were used to calculate inter-rater reliability for both framing interpretation and compliance with the task.

As noted in the study, the small sample size limited the possibility of conducting much statistical analysis, but results did reveal an interesting observation: some essays, though judged poorly in terms of elements of task compliance, received higher holistic scores than other essays where task compliance was better. The researchers proposed this outcome may have derived from the type of prompt—that is, whether it required general or field-specific knowledge. As the authors suggest, prompt type may relate to who holds more authority in the subject (reader or writer), and hence affect the type of judgment an essay receives. The results led the researchers to conclude that task comparability should be examined in more detail and that holistic scores may not be the best method for rating essays.

In the context of defining writing ability, perhaps the most important observation from Tedick and Mathison's (1995) study is that essay framing (i.e., topic development) may significantly affect holistic essay scores, with well-framed essays potentially receiving higher scores. In other words, framing appears to be a defining feature of writing that should be considered in any complete construct definition of writing ability. An interesting result in this

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study was that both beginning and intermediate learners appeared to be better at framing their field-specific essays than general topic essays, while the advanced learners had the same framing ability for each type of essay prompt. This suggests L2 writers may develop strategies for presenting topic knowledge in writing before they reach advanced levels of L2 linguistic proficiency. An additional observation is the influence of task demands on L2 writing, suggesting that specialized topic knowledge may assist L2 learners in producing better writing. A complete theory of L2 writing ability, especially one based on L2 development, would need to account for these observations.

Findings from these and other empirical studies can help L2 writing researchers ascertain with more precision what is construct-relevant for L2 writing ability. While L1 researchers and practitioners may find it appropriate to define L1 writing ability by a writer's creativity, logic, voice, style, success at self-discovery, and skill at knowledge transforming (see Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Flower & Hayes, 1980, 1981), L2 writing researchers may find many of these same features less relevant for successful L2 writing. Instead, variables such as L2 linguistic proficiency, balance between linguistic and rhetorical sophistication, and task demands appear to be more critical (Cumming, 1989; Raimes, 1987; Reutten, 1991; Tedick & Mathison, 1995).

## Rubrics as Models of L2 Writing Ability

Since writing ability is a type of performance (McNamara, 1996), evaluations of this ability rely on rater judgments. To assist raters in assigning scores, many writing specialists have developed scoring rubrics identifying features raters should attend to. Though not fully developed theories of writing, scoring rubrics designed to evaluate L2 writing present an "implicit theory about the nature of writing" as well as "implicit assumptions … about the development of L2 writing skills" (Valdes, Haro, & Arriarza, 1992, pp. 334-335). In fact, such rating guidelines represent "the most concrete statement of the construct being measured" (Weigle, 2002, p. 72).

One very detailed rubric created for defining L2 writing ability is presented in Cumming et al. (2000). For Cumming et al., L2 writing ability is defined by a focus on "transmitting, rather than creating knowledge" which they see as "consistent with our primary interest: individuals' writing and language abilities, rather than their academic knowledge or expressive creativity per se" (p. 5). In other words, for Cumming et al., L2 writing ability in an academic context is more related to knowledge reporting than knowledge creating or transforming. Concerning the specific features of L2 writing, the researchers specify that L2 writing ability depends on the writer's "selection of appropriate words and phrases; on facility with the conventions of grammar, punctuation, and spelling; and on the competent use of logic and rhetorical devices to sustain a reader's attention and direction" (p. 14). Such statements are indicative of how a model of L2 writing might differ from an L1 model. Cumming et al. go on to provide a potential rubric of evaluative criteria useful for defining L2 academic writing ability.

In their framework, Cumming et al. (2000) divide L2 writing ability into two dimensions, one concerning discourse and content organization related to a specific task, and the other, linguistic accuracy and appropriate usage. The first dimension, discourse, is further described as organization, coherence, progression, development of ideas, and, depending on task, the ability to integrate or summarize sources. The second dimension includes features of language use, such as vocabulary, illocutionary markers, morphosyntax, spelling, and punctuation. The similarities

between this model for L2 writing ability and Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model for communicative language ability are striking. In fact, where Bachman and Palmer added strategic competence to their model, some L2 writing researchers (e.g., Cumming, 1989; Krapels, 1990) have suggested that a separable skill of writing proficiency might complement L2 ability during L2 writing performance. This raises the question: What might be unique to L2 writing to distinguish it from general L2 proficiency?

Research in L1 writing illustrates that some writers may be fully proficient linguistically, yet they are considered inexpert or unskilled writers, lending support to the existence of a separate component for writing competence. As noted earlier, based on empirical research, Cumming (1989) concluded that language proficiency is a necessary but insufficient condition for successful L2 writing ability. And according to Harris and Silva (1993), "the distinction between language proficiency and writing ability is not clear cut," yet "it is crucial to make such a distinction in order to understand and address a given [L2] writer's problems" (p. 529). Therefore, another important question that must be addressed in constructing a model of L2 writing ability is: Where does this separate competence fit into a rubric for evaluating L2 writing ability? Weigle (2002), in fact, points out the need to determine what role strategic competence has in a construct definition of L2 writing ability, especially for academic writing assessment where there may be a greater role for strategic competence than in other types of writing ability. In short, a model of L2 writing ability must indicate: (1) how L2 writing ability is distinct from other types of L2 knowledge, and (2) how L2 proficiency and writing ability interact.

One model that addresses these questions is described by Grabe and Kaplan (1996). Drawing on Canale and Swain (1980), Canale (1983), Bachman (1990), and other research from both L1 and L2 studies, Grabe and Kaplan (1996) propose that L2 writing ability includes elements of the language use context (e.g., participants, setting, task, topic, textual input and output); the writer's internal goal-setting; verbal processing (which relies on both long-term and working memory and includes various elements of language competence as well as knowledge of the world); and a final component for internal processing output where the output can be checked against the original goal from an earlier stage. Grabe and Kaplan state this model "provides a way to integrate the three major concerns for a theory of writing: a writer's cognitive processing, the linguistic and textual resources that instantiate the writing task, and the contextual factors which strongly shape the nature of the writing" (p. 229). In other words, this model incorporates writing process features first identified in L1 studies (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Flower & Hayes, 1980, 1981), language use features described by L2 researchers (Bachman, 1990; Canale, 1983; Canale & Swain, 1980), and additional contextual features specific to writing, such as textual output and reading ability. Grabe and Kaplan's (1996) model is attractive for defining L2 writing, as it is founded on previous research in both writing and L2 studies. One noted limitation, however, is that it does not account for differences in L2 writers' language proficiency (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996), nor how such differences might be related to observable features in writing performance. Additionally, for a construct definition to be useful for testing purposes, especially in large-scale writing assessment, it must also lend itself to operationalization.

# DISCUSSION

## Toward a More Complete Definition of L2 Writing Ability

Given the developmental nature of L2 writing ability, a more comprehensive construct definition of this ability might aim to include a hierarchical dimension, one that takes into account how learners at different stages of proficiency represent knowledge and ability. For example, it is possible that the discrepancies between linguistic and rhetorical features that Reutten (1991) observed may represent a typical stage of L2 writing ability development; that the components in L2 writing rubrics, as in Cumming et al. (2000), interact differently, depending on the writer's level of expertise; that linguistic proficiency and writing ability also interact in different, yet predictable, ways for different levels of ability; and that topic expertise, as observed by Tedick and Mathison (1995), may encourage L2 learners to access existing schemata, and thus influence the manifestation of their writing ability. It could be that expert L2 writers represent metalinguistic knowledge and writing strategies in a more efficient manner, while novices tend to rely on less parsimonious representations, taxing their working and long-term memory during the writing process. One goal for theory development in L2 writing research, therefore, might be to describe more precisely how different types of L2 writing performance illustrate a learner's stage of proficiency. Such a precise model could then be operationalized for large-scale testing purposes.

Based on research indicating that L2 writers differ in many ways from L1 writers (Silva, 1993; Weigle, 2002), some L2 writing specialists have proposed that, rather than maintain L1 expectations for L2 writers, perhaps the two types of writers should be evaluated by different criteria (Carlson & Bridgeman, 1986; Silva, 1997). It has also been suggested that readers of L2 writing should develop a broader concept of what constitutes good writing (Leki, 1992). As Leki (1992) notes, L2 writers "can become very fluent writers of English, but they may never become indistinguishable from a native speaker, and it is unclear why they should" (p. 152). Carlson and Bridgeman (1986) also question the "relevance" (p. 126) of applying L1 writing standards to L2 writers. These suggestions recall researchers in other areas of L2 studies who caution against imposing a *comparative fallacy* on L2 learners' development (Bley-Vroman, 1983). In fact, it might be more fruitful for theory development for L2 researchers to highlight, rather than minimize, the "salient" differences between L1 and L2 writing in order to discover and address L2 writers' "special characteristics and needs" (Silva, 1997, p. 209).

A construct definition that includes a developmental dimension could help test designers select assessment criteria that are not only relevant specifically for L2 writers, but also indicative of the developmental stage an L2 writer has reached. Such writing assessments would be particularly useful in the context of large-scale writing assessments where test designers must rely on theoretical construct definitions. Furthermore, a more detailed definition would allow writing instructors to better address developing writers' needs, identifying where learners are located along a developmental continuum and thus informing both theory and practice.

# CONCLUSION

Given the "elusive" nature of writing ability (Frodeson & Holten, 2003, p. 141), the lack of a universally accepted construct definition is not surprising, nor is the fact that researchers' interest in practice has surpassed their work in L2 writing theory. With the expanding use of large-scale writing assessments, however, where interpretations of writing performance are usually founded on theoretically based constructs, it is critical for such constructs be defined as completely as possible. To this end, both practitioners and researchers in the field of L2 writing must continue to explore the nature of L2 writing ability and how it is represented in learners at different proficiency levels.

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