Learning to Write in the Second Language: K-5

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Research and the teaching of writing have evolved over time. From a focus on product where the expectation was that children had to be “corrected” until they achieved adult-like writing performance, to an emphasis on process where children are expected to experiment on their way to achieving adult-like proficiency. More recently, there has been an interest in genre “largely a response to changing views of discourse and of learning to write which incorporate better understandings of how language is structured to achieve social purposes in particular contexts of use” (Hyland, 2007, p. 148). Genre research focuses on students’ products as evidence of the children’s linguistic, communicative, and cognitive knowledge (Fang, 1999). These products are not prescribed but are the result of the interaction between contextual and linguistic input.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the development of writing of elementary age bilingual learners in their second language (L2). Fitzgerald (2006) summarized in great detail the existing research on L2 writing and concluded that the evidence indicates that development of writing in young L2 writers does not differ much from writing development of native speakers of English. In this chapter, the existing research will be framed within two theories to analyze what L2 writers need to develop to be successful, particularly in school contexts. By framing the existing research in these theories, the chapter will show what is known and what teachers need to develop through instruction.

The research on L2 writing by children in elementary grades is framed within a theoretical model that is based on systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday, 1994) and Walters’ (2005) model of bilingualism (see Figure 3.1). Texts, or the language produced orally or in writing, exist in the context of culture and are further embedded in the context of situation. Language users make choices in producing texts that are influenced by extralinguistic and linguistic input. The extralinguistic level includes register, medium, and purpose or genre. At the linguistic level, language users choose from lexical, grammatical, and orthographic knowledge (Butt, Fahey, Feez, Spinks, & Yallop, 2000). Walters (2005) proposes a model of language production by bilinguals that includes a sociopragmatic component, similar to the extralinguistic component of the SFL model, and a psycholinguistic component, similar to the linguistic component of the SFL model. These two components interact in the intentional component, which specifies the pragmatic intentions and the information to be conveyed, comparable to what SFL calls genre or purpose. In addition, Walters proposes that bilinguals are influenced by language choice and affective modules at every aspect of language production. The language choice module “selects, regulates, and retrieves information from a speaker’s two languages during
the entire course of language production” (p. 92). The affective module “is designed to select, regulate, and retrieve emotion-based information from other components of language processing” (p. 94).

The combination of these two theories helps create a framework that takes an in-depth look at the second language in the context of bilingualism. SFL provides a clear and complete theoretical picture of the choices children need to make if they want to “use linguistic codes to construct contextually appropriate and coherent text” (Fang, 1999, p. 180). Bilingual learners trying to write in the second language struggle with what they want to say. SFL provides teachers with the tools to analyze language and determine what bilingual students need to learn to express what they want to say in ways that will be understood and accepted by the culture (Schleppegrell & Go, 2007).

Within the SFL framework, learning to write means making the appropriate choices to convey meaning given the context of the specific situation, which exists within the context of a culture. As children develop writing they realize that they have power in language. They can “manipulate language for the best effect” (Urzua, 1987, p. 295). Writing in a US school means that children need to know the culturally appropriate patterns expected in the school. Different situational contexts call for different language choices based on the topic addressed (field), the relationship between the writer and readers (tenor), and the channel of communication being used, written or multimodal (mode). Together they constitute the linguistic register. An important aspect of schooling is familiarizing students with the academic registers of various content areas. Children also need to understand the features of the medium, such as books, letters, poems, or PowerPoints, each requiring certain organization and features. Another essential aspect of writing influencing language choices is the purpose, such as story telling, giving instructions, providing organized information, and persuading. These various purposes are realized in text types or genres, such as recounts, fictional narratives, procedures, reports, explanations, and expositions. Each of these genres has a specific culturally defined structural organization and language expectations (Butt et al., 2000). Writing also requires knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, spelling, and conventions. All these choices present challenges to children developing writing.

The research in L2 writing is discussed in this chapter in relation to language choice, affect, context of culture, context of situation, register, medium, and genre. The concepts as defined by the theories
will be further explained in each subsection. To conclude, the chapter summarizes the way in which combining SFL with Walters’ model provides a useful framework for understanding L2 writing and the needs of bilingual learners.

Language Choice

Bilinguals have access to more than one language and, according to Walters’ theory (2005), they make choices at all levels of the production process. These choices are influenced by social factors, such as demographics and language status; interpersonal factors, such as setting, audience, topic, and attitudes; and individual factors, such as identity, language preference, language proficiency, and motivation (Walters, 2005). Even very young bilingual children are aware that they have more than one language and that they are different. For example, an emergent Chinese–English bilingual writer used invented spelling in both Chinese and English that looked like the characters or letters of each language (Buckwalter & Lo, 2002).

Children are not confused between the languages, although when they access language, they may switch to a different language or access native language (L1) data when writing in their second (L2). Code-switching is the alternate use of two languages (Mackey, 1968). Code-switching in written language is not as common as in oral language (Edelsky, 1986). Young writers switch because they do not have access to a term in the other language, or they do it on purpose to enhance the text. In a two-way program, both English and Spanish speakers writing in their native language would code-switch to the second language when writing about cultural aspects of that second language (Gort, 2006). Children may choose the language depending on the specific purpose and audience. For example, a 5th grader, who wrote mostly in Spanish, switched to English to pass secret notes to her English-speaking classmates (Laman & Van Sluys, 2008). Code-switching can occur across modes. Lo and Hyland (2007) noticed that when their students were given more freedom in the choice of topic they became very engaged and sometimes could not think how to write in English. They would give the sentence or phrase orally in Chinese for the teachers to translate so they could write it in English. Sometimes the choice of language is defined by the classroom context. In a two-way program, students went from writing in one of the languages to writing in both. Only one 5th grader switched to writing only in English. In general, students felt more confident writing in their dominant language. They used more words, better spelling, more complexity, and better developed ideas (García & Colón, 1995). Teachers may encourage students to use their native language or may restrict writing to the second language. Even when encouraged to write in their native language, within a year (as their proficiency in English developed) students had switched to writing in English (Graves, Valles, & Rueda, 2000). On other occasions, bilingual students code-switched to English when writing in their native language. Often they encounter new concepts in the new culture for which they do not have terms in their native language, or they just get used to using these terms in English (Barrett-Pugh & Rohl, 2001; Gort 2006).

Children sometimes write texts in both languages, one being an approximate translation of the other. For example, a 1st grade Hebrew speaker divided the page in two, writing in Hebrew and English alongside each other. She wanted to share the notebook with her classmates, as well as teach them words in Hebrew (Lahman & Van Luys, 2008). Another child liked writing bilingual books, as her English was not as good as her Spanish; the Spanish version was simpler to facilitate writing the English version (Homza, 1995).

When L2 writers do not have access to linguistic information in L2, they resort to using L1 data to write in English. Accessing L1 as a resource may have different results in what is produced in the L2. Positive influence of L1 may not be apparent to the naked eye, but research has shown correlation between native language writing ability and performance in writing in English as a second
language, even when the native language uses a different script (Cummins, 1991). Length of utterances, spelling (Davis, Carlisle, & Beeman, 1999), concept of print (Buckwalter & Lo, 2002), and productivity (Carlisle & Beeman, 2001) showed positive transfer. This positive influence is more evident when English is in the early stages of development, and when the native language literacy is strong (Lanauze & Snow, 1989).

Sometimes L1 influences L2 products, especially grammatical structures and spelling, resulting in non-native like language. First grade Spanish-speakers applied Spanish sentence structure to their English writing (Gort, 2006). They also omitted the subject, a common feature of Spanish grammar (Simpson, 2004). Khmer-speaking students in Australia, when writing in English, had difficulty with a number of grammatical morphemes due to Khmer influence. The fact that Khmer does not change words to indicate plural and past tense, it does not use articles, and uses prepositions differently influenced the inaccurate production of past tense, plural, articles, and prepositions when writing in English (Barrett-Pugh & Rohl, 2001). L1 can also influence spelling. L2 writers apply L1 phonology when spelling in English (Gort, 2006). Rather than view these L1-based choices negatively, educators must take the perspective that “what a young writer knows about writing in the first language forms the basis of new hypotheses rather than interferes with writing in another language” (Edelsky, 1982, p. 227).

To some degree, L1 influence may be related to the linguistic environment. Among students who are learning English in an environment where their L1 is widely used, the influence of L1 may be greater. Elementary students in Hong Kong wrote sentences that were a direct translation from Chinese to English (Lo & Hyland, 2007). These children were exposed to English only in school, and were otherwise immersed in Cantonese in all other contexts. The writing of Chinese children in school in the US, for the most part, showed little influence of Chinese in their English, with the exception of one child’s writings that reflected a Chinese rhetorical structure. He concluded a report on computer games with a moral, a typical feature of Chinese rhetorical style (McCarthey, Guo, & Cummins, 2005). These children were surrounded by English while Chinese was only used at home. However, other research has also found evidence of the influence of L1 on L2 writing within English-speaking societies. Age of acquisition, level of proficiency, specific aspects of language, educational experiences, and register may explain the degree of this influence.

**Affect**

Emotions affect language production, impacting the individual’s social identity. For example, an individual may fail at appearing humorous because humor is difficult to produce in a second language. Sometimes affect works in conjunction with choice, as when an author chooses to code-switch to reflect their cultural identity.

Affect impacts genre choice. Writers associate certain genres with one of their languages and others with the other. Walters (2005) argues that “the only apparent way to become an accomplished writer in two languages at the same time is to divide one’s writing along genre lines” (p. 107).

Affect also impacts topic choice. Children reveal their feelings through writing and try to address their problems through it. Boys dislike writing personal recounts, but they will address personal struggles through fictional narratives (Newkirk, 2000). For example, a big student routinely bullied a small-built Puerto Rican 5th grader. His victim wrote a story about both visiting Puerto Rico and going horseback riding. The big boy fell from the horse in the story and died.

**Context of Culture**

According to SFL theory all texts exist in the context of culture (Butt et al., 2000). Learning to write in English as a second language means also learning how to function in a new culture. How
writing is taught and the performance expectations in different cultures vary. For example, the process approach to teaching writing prevalent in the United States confuses Vietnamese children who like to write correctly from the start. They do not understand the notion of writing drafts and then revising (Dien, 2004). Culture defines all aspects of the language choices, including topic, relationship with the audience, specific features of the language of written text, as well as structural organization of texts and language features of various genres.

Cultural differences are salient in the uses of genres, the structural organization of texts, and expected language features given the genre. These culturally different styles are more of a challenge for students who have already started their schooling in their country of origin. It is also difficult for parents who try to understand these new rhetorical styles expected in schools. Recount or narrative genres are difficult because narratives are deeply rooted in culture and shared with children at home from an early age, either through reading or oral story telling (McCabe & Bliss, 2003; Perez, 2004). These narrative styles are transferred to personal recounts and fictional narratives produced by students. Personal recounts or narratives, widely used in writing instruction in elementary schools in the United States, create some tensions either because students use their own cultural organizational patterns (unacceptable to teachers), or because in certain cultures it is not considered appropriate to write about close personal matters in school (Dien, 2004).

Persuasive writing also varies across cultures. Indirection and starting a persuasive essay with a universal truth, rather than a thesis or claim are features of Chinese writing. Arabic persuasive writing supports reasons appealing to emotions, rather than with facts (Connor, 2002; Hinkel, 2002; Matalene, 1985). For many students just expressing an opinion is very difficult. In many cultures only adults express opinions, and children remain silent (Matalene, 1985).

Matsuda (1997) warns against stereotyping rhetorical practices of bilingual writers. He maintains that the construction of text structures by such writers is a dynamic process influenced by their cultural background, personal experiences, and instruction. The influence of the two languages is mutual. For young writers, who often learn the patterns of the American culture, the influence of L2 on L1 structural organization of text can be more pronounced. McCarthey et al. (2005) report that by the second year in the United States students’ Chinese writing increasingly reflected US norms.

Aspects of the register are influenced by culture. For example, in American writing making the text clear is the writer’s responsibility; the writer elaborates on the text to make interpretation accessible to the reader. Japanese consider it an insult to the reader to be too specific; implying the reader is incapable of understanding or inferring from the text (Hinds, 1987). Communal cultures are used to taking a “we” rather than the “I” perspective, common in American personal recounts (Matalene, 1985; Maguire & Graves, 2001). Children often start their narratives introducing the whole family, and then go on telling the story from the “we” perspective. For example, a Spanish-speaking 3rd grader wrote, “I was going to New York City. … There was 18 people in two cars. … We got there all ready. We saw a lot of buildings. We went in the hotel. We checked out for 3 hotel rooms ….” Such cultural perspectives may have an impact on perception of students’ writings. For example, the student samples posted on the internet of the Massachusetts state test illustrating the highest scores of the 4th grade long composition are all written in the first person singular. Those illustrating the lowest scores are written in the first person plural.

The topic of the text can be influenced by culture. Some students find it difficult to write about something that they have learned in another language, or that they associate with a particular culture. For example, Arabic students found it difficult to write about Ramadan in English or smoking in Arabic, topics they associated with the opposite culture (Bou-Zeneiddine, 1994). Chinese students found it difficult writing about a topic of their own creation, as opposed to something connected to history or a tradition (Matalene, 1985).
It is important not to stereotype cultural patterns because bilingual students may be raised in a bicultural environment and be accustomed to American cultural ways, or because they are very young and have not attended school and are learning many of the features of written text for the first time in the second language (Lisle & Mano, 1997). For example, a Somalian 2nd grader, much to her teacher’s dismay, wrote elaborate personal recounts reflecting her own culture’s narrative style. In school she was taught how to write reports, and (much to her teacher’s surprise) was quick to apply the text structure expected in schools.

Context of Situation

Children develop writing in the second language in the context of different situations. The context of situation affects writing development of bilingual learners on four levels: societal, school, home, and specific writing task. Countries vary in their support for the various languages their inhabitants speak. Social, political, cultural, and economic factors impact the attitude toward languages (Baker, 2006; Brisk, Burgos, & Hamerla, 2004). Bilingual children in the United States learn to write in a context where their bilingualism encounters limited social and political support. Lack of support for heritage languages influences school and home practices. In addition to attitude toward bilingualism, writing development in schools is influenced by the pressure to learn academic English and succeed in high-stakes tests.

Schools and families respond to political pressures to favor one or the other language. Some students in the United States attend bilingual programs where they develop full literacy in two languages (Lindholm-Leary, 2001). Most students develop literacy in English with the heritage language only used initially in the case of transitional bilingual education programs (Brisk, 2006). Some families promote heritage language literacy at home and others do not (McCarthey et al., 2005; Smith, 2006). However, research has shown that regardless of the efforts that families or schools may carry out to support heritage languages, the attitudes and practices of the larger environment prevail in children’s bilingual development. Thus, children in the United States are more likely to develop English to a higher level (Caldas & Caron-Caldas, 2002). Moreover, writing in the heritage language is often strongly influenced by English. Code-switching to English is common (Gort, 2006), and text structure of genres follows the English norms (Barrett-Pugh & Rohl, 2001; McCarthey et al., 2005).

Research points out that biliteracy is not only possible but also may be desirable. Strong writing ability in the native language supports writing development in the second language (Barrett-Pugh & Rohl, 2001; Carlisle & Beeman, 2000; Cummins, 1991). For students receiving writing instruction in both languages, early development appears first in their dominant language, and later is transferred to their second language (Gort, 2006). Development in each language will depend on the features of the language itself, the influence of one language on the other, and instruction. For example, Khmer bilingual students attending a bilingual program in Australia found the Khmer writing system difficult and took longer to develop. The syntactic structure of Khmer influenced English syntax resulting in verb tense and person errors, as well as prepositions and articles. In turn, English text organization influenced Khmer narrative writing. Despite these difficulties students develop writing in both languages. By the end of the third year in the program, students could write in both languages considering purpose and audience, with control over most essential elements (Barrett-Pugh & Rohl, 2001).

Simpson (2004) reports on 1st graders in Ecuador being instructed only in English, but encouraged to write in both languages. Their writing products were comparable in quality in some aspects, but showed fewer errors and more formulaic style in English, the language of instruction.

Another impact of bilingualism is metalinguistic awareness. Children negotiating two or more languages notice and talk about differences between the languages (Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2001;
Dagenais & Day, 2000). This ability to talk about language is an important aspect of understanding language and can help development (Swain, 2005).

Instruction is an important contextual factor on L2 writing development (Brisk & Harrington, 2007; Samway, 2006). Balanced literacy instruction, with native oral language support, helped Portuguese-speaking kindergarten students develop reading and writing in English (Araujo, 2002). Some effective strategies include using cooperative and interactive instruction (Gutierrez, 1994), mentoring and scaffolding, as opposed to highly controlled writing (Huss, 1995), and using peer support groups (Prater and Bermúdez, 1993; Urzua, 1987). Allowing the use of native language for planning and interacting was found more helpful in improving students’ attitudes toward school (Fitzgerald, 2006) and comprehension of concepts (Garrett, Griffiths, James, & Scholfield, 1994; Huss, 1995), rather than directly in improving English writing. Explicit instruction using the SFL framework greatly helps students develop L2 writing for authentic purposes (Brisk & Zisselsberger, forthcoming; Gebhard, Harman, & Seger, 2007). Analyzing the context of high-stakes tests informed by SFL helped students in two 4th grade classrooms understand that they were producing text to impress a person they didn’t know with their language and writing skills. Their narratives became lengthy and interesting, with varied vocabulary and figurative language, descriptive adjectivals, and numerous adverbials showing place, time, and manner.

Register

Register is language variation relative to context. Thompson (2004, p. 40) explains this relationship below:

There are three main dimensions of variation which characterize any register: what is being talked about (this is called the “field”); the people involved in the communication and the relationship between them (the “tenor”); and how the language is functioning in the interaction: for example, whether it is written or spoken (the “mode”).

Thus the field or topic, tenor, and mode help shape the language choices writers make when producing text.

Field

Knowledge, choice, and language demands of the field or topic are important in development and teaching of writing. Knowledge of the topic is essential to being able to write about it. In addition, L2 writers need the language to express their knowledge. Teachers claim that students do not know what to write about due to lack of background knowledge. Escamilla (2006) argues that bilingual students have rich background knowledge, but teachers do not tap into it for writing. Even if students express rich ideas, their value may be lost to teachers because they hide behind numerous spelling and mechanical errors (Hernández, 2001). Peer-conferencing helps students with choosing and developing the topic (Prater & Bermúdez, 1993). In classrooms where writing development is combined with content areas, content knowledge must be developed to give L2 writers the knowledge and technical language needed for writing. A group of 5th grade teachers who had asked students to write persuasive pieces in connection to their social studies units found that students had difficulty building evidence without strong knowledge of content.

The research on supporting L2 learners with the choice of topic, addresses the kinds of topics fostered in classrooms and the importance of who makes topic choices. Drawing on students’ personal experiences and knowledge is considered a key source for writing content (Cummins, 2005; Moll,
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Bilingual students should be exposed to writing other topics because writing is an important medium for learning new topics. Huss (1995) found that when six-year-old Punjabi children in England were given the choice, they wrote on a greater variety of topics than when the teachers assigned topics. However, in a 5th grade class, the student who had the greatest difficulty with writing, when given a choice, wrote over and over again about his personal experiences with video games. The teacher switched from just letting the students write about whatever they chose, to developing writing activities with different purposes (i.e., genres), such as writing a class cookbook with family favorite recipes, creating an ad for their science invention, and writing a letter to the judge, siding with the wolf or the three little pigs after reading The True Story of the Three Little Pigs (Scieszka, 1989). The students’ products changed not only in topic but also in quality. The evidence suggests that bilingual students should be allowed to choose topics that draw on personal experience, but they should also be exposed to new topics and different genres.

Topic choice produces language demands. To use language in order to create intended meaning, young L2 writers need vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. Research on L2 acquisition underscores the importance of vocabulary development (Páez & Rinaldi, 2006; Proctor, August, Carlo, & Snow, 2006). L2 writers must also learn how to form clauses with noun groups, verb groups, and adverbials. In writing, clauses are often combined into coordinate or compound sentences to pack information. Sentences and paragraphs are linked with rhetorical connectors that help relate the meaning between various sections of the text (Derewianka, 1998).

Grammar, Bae (2001) argues, is a global writing quality “because without adequate competency in grammar it is unlikely that learners can produce writing with quality and text length reasonable enough to communicate ideas” (p. 76). Children in elementary school use mostly simple sentences, making the writing monotonous and also lacking clarity by not showing relationships. These children can use compound and complex sentences orally, but very few appear in their writing (Hernández, 2001). As they grow older, they try to express more complex thoughts but have difficulty using the appropriate syntax (Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2001). A common problem in clauses is the subject–verb agreement (Simpson, 2004).

Sentences include participants and processes. Participants are introduced through nouns. Adjectives are used to describe these participants. Most children use very few adjectives. In a 161-word personal recount, a 3rd grader used only six adjectives. As children develop, these noun describers increase (Schleppegrell & Go, 2007). The position of the adjective may be problematic for L2 writers. In a number of languages, including Vietnamese, Khmer, and Spanish, the adjective goes after the noun. For this reason, Schleppegrell and Go (2007) argue that adjectival phrases, which go after the noun in English too, may be easier to use for L2 writers. The 3rd grader mentioned above created a phrase in order to place the adjectives in second place, resulting in an awkward construction (I saw badges from polices and firefighters).

Processes are expressed through verbs. Development of verb groups includes appropriate use of verb tenses and variation in the types of verbs such as action (run, climb), saying (say, question), sensing (think, heard, love), relational (have, be), or existential (there is) verbs. Young L2 writers when telling a story often use the present and past interchangeably. Formation of the past, especially with irregular past, is problematic. L2 writers tend to use mostly action and relational verbs, especially to be, and they often repeat the same verb. When using saying verbs it is always say. For example the 161-word personal narrative mentioned above included 12 action verbs (five to go), nine relational (eight to be), three sensing (all three to see), and one saying. Variety of verbs as well as the use of modals is a sign of development (Schleppegrell & Go, 2007). Verbs are further described through adverbs and adverbial phrases or clauses indicating place, time, manner, cause, accompaniment, and others (Butt et al., 2000; Derewianka, 1998). The personal narrative mentioned above included 11 adverbs and adverbial phrases only indicating time and place.
Grammatical morphemes are one of the greatest challenges for L2 learners, and can persist even when students have become very proficient in English (Genesee, Paradis, & Crago, 2004; Menyuk & Brisk, 2005). Such errors as past tense (Then we went in side the house and sleep; He never ever did told me ...), third person singular (because water expand), plurals (Don’t worry if you have childrens), prepositions (He died in July, 26), determiners (The Dennis was helping the Helen) (Bae, 2001, p. 73). As well as, omission of the verb to be (both copula Cortes want to famous and auxiliary Rosa parks married to Raymond parks), possessive (We went to the house of my ant’s) (Gort, 2006, p. 329), relative pronouns (man play a piano instead of man who plays piano) (Schleppegrell & Go, 2007, p. 532), pronouns (no distinction between she, her in Khmer and Korean; She mom gives for Mom gives her) (Bae, 2001, p. 73; Barratt-Pugh & Rohl, 2001), and contractions (his going to).

Tenor

From a very young age children are socialized on how to use language with different audiences. Bilingual children also develop the ability to choose the appropriate language given the audience (Laman & Van Sluys, 2008). Developing a sense of audience in writing is harder because the audience is not often present. Urzua (1987) found that peer-conferencing helped students understand that the purpose of writing is “to communicate something important to an audience” (p. 285). Understanding of audience background knowledge impacts the content and coherence of the writing. The writer needs to gage the level of detail that must be included in developing the piece so that it makes sense. In a personal recount of his early life, a 3rd grader wrote about his pre-school in California and about entering the W.R., his present school, in kindergarten. However, he neglected to include that by then he had moved to Massachusetts. It made sense for his immediate audience, that was familiar with the whereabouts of this school, but it would not have made sense to other audiences. Awareness of the audience had an impact on efforts made by the children to revise their writing. Before this awareness, Urzua (1987) reports that revision meant recopying to make the writing neater, but not to improve it. When writing in the second language bilinguals must understand that they need to be comprehensible to readers from a different culture. Although developing a sense of audience is difficult to achieve in writing, Martínez, Orellana, Pacheco, and Carbone (2008) argue that bilingual students’ translation practice in their daily lives helps develop skills in adjusting language to different audiences and purposes. Researchers gave 6th grade bilingual students the challenge of writing a persuasive piece in their L2 for two different audiences. These students carefully constructed their argument for a more formal audience, but they were more casual when writing to their friends. They also chose different reasons and evidence, grammatical structures, and vocabulary.

The interpersonal function, or tenor, not only focuses on audience but also on the language users and the identity or voice they choose to reflect through their language choices. Bilingual writers may or may not choose to reflect their cultural and/or linguistic background in their language, or the evidence may be very subtle (Walters, 2005). Voice is “the imprint of ourselves on our writing” (Graves, 1983, p. 227). Voice reflects the identity that writers want to present to readers. Development of voice comes with interest in the topic and confidence in writing. As students in Urzua’s study (1987) grew confident, they made decisions on how to improve their writing, accepting or ignoring peers’ comments relative to what the writers thought sounded appropriate. Different genres call for different voice (Schleppegrell, 2006). A writer may reflect humor through a personal recount, authoritative through a report, and pathos through a persuasive piece. In their journal narratives, bilingual children showed great skill in reflecting their individual self. They used “I to describe an action, feeling, or point of view … we to describe a shared value, membership in a group activity, or a member of a community,… and she, he, and they to adopt a more distant stance as a persona” (Maguire & Graves, 2001, p. 588).
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Mode

A text can be oral, written, or multimodal. In developing written language among L2 learners, the role of oral language has been a source of controversy. Earlier L2 methodologies encouraged the development of oral language before teaching literacy. Hudelson’s (1984) and Edelsky’s (1982) research demonstrated that L2 students enhanced their L2 development through reading and writing, and that there was no need to wait for full oral proficiency to introduce literacy. Reading can have an important impact on writing (Davis et al., 1999). Bernhardt (1991) concluded that both knowledge of the second language and literacy knowledge acquired through either language were essential for literacy development. Therefore oral language is important in as much as it helps develop the second language, but it is not a pre-condition for learning to write.

The mode or textual function also refers to how writers construct their messages in a way that all the parts fit smoothly as the text unfolds. In written text, mode includes text coherence, cohesion, and structure, as well as knowledge of the writing system, spelling, and conventions. Each presents a challenge to L2 writers.

Coherence refers to the text making sense, and there is cohesion when the text hangs together. Bae (2001) found that in the writing of early elementary children there was high correlation between coherence, content, and grammar. In turn, all of them correlated with text length and fluency. Coherence and content appeared to be related to maturity since 2nd graders demonstrated greater ability than 1st graders. In addition, coherence is supported by appropriate text structure defined by the genre and medium. Different genres require different organizational structures, as will be shown later. Organization of text also depends on the medium.

“At the more micro-level, the flow of information in the text is controlled by the choice of theme” (Derewianka, 1998, p. 104). The theme in SFL is the first constituent of the clause and the point of departure of the message. It places the clause within the context of the whole text (Thompson, 2004). What follows the theme is the rheme, or information about the theme. Young writers also need to include this theme to orient the reader. Hernández (2001) found that some students start by introducing the theme, and others start directly with the specific information. She found this to be a different skill from grammar and spelling. One of the students in her study had been identified as a low writer because of issues of grammar and spelling, yet her organizational skills were more developed than several of the other students, even those deemed to be better writers.

Cohesive ties impact text coherence. There are five types of cohesive links: reference, conjunctions, ellipsis, substitution, and lexical ties (Bae, 2001). The conjunction and and temporal connectives are prevalent in narratives (Maguire & Graves, 2001). In a study of 1st and 2nd graders, Bae (2001) found that referential and lexical links were the cohesive devises most used by children and accounted for almost two-thirds of the variance in coherence. Bae infers that acquisition of reference markers and of vocabulary are critical for length and quality of writing.

The other types of cohesive links, such as ellipsis, substitution, and conjunctions had no real impact on coherence. Ellipsis and substitution were barely used, while conjunctions (especially and) were used more often, but did not contribute to the overall quality of the writing. Overuse of and also changed with maturity, as 2nd graders used a greater variety of conjunctions. L2 writers tend to overuse such rhetorical connectors (Hinkel, 2002). Reynolds (2002) distinguished between links more typical of oral language (and, then, when), and those more common in written language (because, so, therefore, thus). He found that native speakers of English used more of the former when writing familiar topics and more of the latter when writing on school-related topics. L2 writers used more connectors overall regardless of topic, and there was not much difference in the amount between the two types in both kinds of topics.

Children had other difficulties with cohesive ties such as unclear references, problems with
determiners, unnatural use of conjunctions, and others. For L2 learners, the greatest source of cohesive errors were the determiners either because the and a were misused or omitted (Bae, 2001).

To create text, L2 writers need to know the writing, spelling, and convention system of English. These features can be very different in the languages of bilingual learners. Barrett-Pugh and Rohl (2001) studied Cambodian children learning to write in Khmer and English. These children had to learn to write in two different scripts with different conventions. Initially there were difficulties in both languages because of the nature of the languages themselves, or because of differences between the languages. Eventually, some of the children became quite good at writing in both scripts, using the appropriate conventions. When scripts are similar writers may use the system of their L1 to spell English. First grade Spanish speakers used their sound system to spell in English (Frayday for Friday, clous for clothes, and si for see) (Gort, 2006, p. 339). Children also spelled tipp for type because in Spanish the name of the vowel is also the sound (Hernández, 2001). Children who use the name of the letter as a strategy, rather than place of articulation and voice–voiceless distinction are worse spellers. The voice–voiceless distinction is hard for native speakers of Spanish and needs to be taught (Ferroli & Shanahan, 1993). The fact that English is a deep orthography language with no one-to-one correspondence between sound and symbol causes spelling problems, such as not using double consonants, dropped for dropped (Hernández, 2001), or knowing the vowel combination for meat, feet, and priest, since all sound the same. Spelling errors are the most prevalent errors in the writing of young children. When spelling is not automatic then children resort to invented spelling in order to pay attention to the message itself (Simpson, 2004). Although spelling and conventions improve over time (Davis et al., 1999; Maguire & Graves, 2001) as students’ writing increased in length and complexity so did the spelling errors (Carlisle, 1989). Orthographic processing, or the understanding of writing conventions of the language, and correct and incorrect spelling of words remained a problem for both good and poor adolescent trilingual writers in all their languages (Abu-Rabia & Siegel, 2003).

Medium

Writers use different media for their texts, such as letters, poems, storybooks, informational books, memos, and others, each of which have their own norms to organize text. Some features of the medium can be culture specific. For example, American letters go straight to the point, while in other cultures the writer tries to first establish relations with the addressee.

Different media offer different opportunities for expression to L2 writers. Journals that lend themselves to writing personal recounts, “serve not only to incorporate the student’s native language and sociocultural experiences but also to nurture the acquisition of communicative competencies in English” (García & Colón, 1995, p. 40). They can also facilitate the students’ ability to develop their own voice and identity (Maguire & Graves, 2001). However, using only journals tends to limit the variety of genres in which students write, since journals contain mostly personal or fictional narratives. Individual writers have shown preference for different media. A young Dakota girl liked writing cards while the boys disliked the task (Franklin & Thompson, 1994). McPhail (2009) noticed that most 1st grade boys preferred comic book writing while girls enjoyed writing in their personal journals. He warns against stereotyping across gender lines.

Sometimes teaching to write in a particular medium can help children read in that medium. When teaching report writing, two 3rd grade teachers taught their bilingual learners how to include information in quotes, boxes, and diagrams imitating the structure of informational texts used in the classroom. These teachers commented that in the past when reading these types of texts, their students would skip the information contained in such features and only read the straight text. Thus, exposure to writing in a variety of media will help students develop a variety of aspects of writing that they need to succeed in American schools.
Genre

“Comparable texts which achieve the same general social purpose, and which therefore draw on the same relatively stable structural pattern, are said to belong to the same genre” (Butt et al., 2000, p. 214). Genre or purpose, which Walters (2005) calls intentional component, is the bridge between social and psycholinguistic information the language user taps into to create utterances or written script (Walters, 2005). Each culture develops patterns of text structures called genres in SFL theory. Genres refer solely to purpose, such as to tell stories, give instructions, organize information, or persuade. It does not include such things as letters, poetry, or comic books, which are considered media. A letter may be written in any of the genres, and as such it will follow the text structure of the chosen genre, as well as the features of a letter. Bilingual learners attending school in the United States are required to write in a variety of genres. For example, the prompts found in the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) for grades 3, 4, and 5 demand personal and procedural recounts, procedure, reports, explanations, exposition (persuasive), and historical accounts. Although students are not required to write fictional narratives and historical recounts, these genres are found in the texts students must read, in order to respond to writing prompts. L2 learners need to learn the structural organization of text and language features expected in these different genres. Recognizing the demands of a genre correlated with overall quality and length of pieces in 4th and 6th graders (Carlisle, 1989).

Various forms of recounts and fictional narratives start with an orientation identifying the main participants, location, and time of the narrative. This is followed by a series of events, and often ends with some type of conclusion. Reports start with a general statement, followed by subtopics, and conclude with a statement usually connected to the initial statement. Persuasive pieces usually start with a thesis or claim, followed by reasons or arguments, each supported by evidence, and end with a conclusion. (For a good description of the organizational structure of various genres see Butt et al., 2000.) These organizational structures present challenges to children developing writing. Success in using such aspects of narrative text structure as a good orientation at the beginning and a successful conclusion was important for making the text comprehensible to the reader, and improved with grade level. However, writing an explicit ending was less successful than writing an introduction with all the typical elements of narratives (Bae, 2001). Young writers developing reports had more difficulty with both the introduction and conclusion. Fourth graders writing persuasive pieces struggled with stating convincing evidence (Bermúdez & Prater, 1994). By 6th grade, students showed the ability to make appropriate changes in the content and language of persuasive pieces when directed to different audiences (Martínez et al., 2008). Instruction supports this development. A 5th grade Spanish-speaking student, wrote, “Come live in Jamestown because people are friendly” using an opinion instead of a proven fact as her evidence. Extensive analysis of persuasive pieces including TV and newspaper advertisements helped the students realize what constitutes evidence. Later this student revised her piece to read, “Also, we have such great friends. Most important, the young girl named Pocahontas. She is a girl that helps us hunt animals and give us food when we are working very hard. We are also friends with other natives.”

Children prefer writing in different genres. A Dakota 1st grade girl preferred personal and fictional narratives where the main participants were the children in her class. Other students in that class showed little interest in personal narratives and preferred fantasies, war stories, and adventure stories (Franklin & Thompson, 1994). This preference often divides along gender lines with boys mostly choosing fictional narratives and girls choosing personal recounts or narratives. Differences across gender lines were also apparent in the quality of persuasive writing samples of Hispanic 4th graders. Essays written by female writers “show a greater degree of elaboration and a clearer attempt to express the writer’s point of view than those written by male Hispanic students, regardless of proficiency level” (Bermúdez & Prater, 1994, p. 53).
Although McPhail’s (2009) research confirmed trends along gender lines, he also found individual differences that went against the gender preferred choices. Writing in the preferred genre correlated with better writing. Thus exposure to different genres is essential to give all children a chance to excel.

Genres have different language demands. (For specific details see Butt et al., 2000 and Derewianka, 1990.) For example, the students in 3rd–5th grade were required to write lab reports. Each component of the report is a different genre demanding a different verb tense. These reports start with a prediction (future), followed by a procedure (imperative), then comes the procedural recount (past), and finally a report (present), an explanation (present), or an argument (present). For example, Carlos, a 3rd grader, used the appropriate tenses. He responded to the question, “Which container will show the most evaporation in one week?” *I think the flat lid is going to evaporate first …* After observing the experiment, Carlos wrote his procedural recount, *The flat lid evaporated because it got more surface area.*

Participants tend to differ with genre. Personal recounts are written in the first person. In procedures usually no person is named, and most other genres are written in the third person, although occasionally fictional narratives are also written in the first person. Students have difficulty writing in the third person. For example, at the beginning of the year, Natacha wrote an uncoached piece about her grandmother. Her first three sentences were in the third person, but quickly transitioned to the first person. “Abuelita is a kind and helpful person …. She promised me that she will bring me to Puerto Rico … I was sad when I heard that abuelita passed away.” Her 5th grade teacher in a unit on historical recounts used several lessons to instruct about third person. Natacha started her piece about Christopher Columbus, “Have you heard of an explorer named Christopher Columbus? He was born in the year 1451. He was born in Genoa.”4 and went on to write the rest of the piece in third person.

Different genres may require different types of adjectives to describe the nouns. In persuasive pieces opinion adjectives are found in the thesis statement, while factual adjectives are found in the evidence. Carmen, a 5th grader, wrote in an advertisement to accompany her scientific invention “People should buy the everlasting clone machine for different good (opinion) reasons. If you live alone in your house and your really sick, the everlasting clone machine will bring you a small (factual) touch screen.”

Through exposure by reading texts in the various genres and abundant writing, L2 learners develop their ability to write in these various genres, acquiring different aspects gradually.

Conclusion

This chapter illustrates what bilingual learners need to master to successfully write in their second language in the context of school. The SFL framework was used because it helps to account explicitly for the extralinguistic and linguistic demands of the task. SFL is also a theory that supports bilingual learners because it places text relative to the culture and situation, giving a legitimate place in the linguistic landscape to students’ languages and language varieties. At the same time, SFL gives teachers tools to unpack English in order to enhance their instruction by explicitly telling students how the language functions. Unfortunately, the limited teacher preparation on language (Fillmore & Snow, 2002) makes it very hard for teachers to tease out language in children’s writing to understand their competence and needs. Pacing the introduction of SFL theory helps teachers absorb knowledge about language in order to impact their writing instruction (Gebhard, Demers, & Castillo-Rosenthal, 2008).

The components of choice and affect from the Walters’ model (2005) add two important forces in the reality of bilingual language practice. Bilinguals have access to linguistic and sociocultural
information that comes from their languages and varied cultural experiences. These constantly inform language use, even in a predominantly monolingual environment often encountered in schools. Moreover, research on L2 development should always be embedded in the context of bilingualism.

Supporting bilingual learners to develop writing in their second language produces tension among educators. Efforts to teach the code students need to succeed in school may give the perception that this knowledge will silence students’ own ways of using language. Taking a bilingual integrative perspective (Taylor, 1987) makes both possible. Integrated bilinguals seek to function in their new culture without abandoning their heritage culture. Educators are well served by the tools provided by SFL and bilingualism “to make the linguistic expectations of schooling explicit to students” (Schleppegrell, 2004, p. 3) while considering that these students bring a wealth of cultural and linguistic knowledge to learning in the second language.

Notes

1. Bilingual learners know more than one language to different degrees. Some may be just in the process of acquiring a second language. The term bilingual rather than second language learner or English language learner is used to denote the full range of language abilities of these students.

2. Much of the content of this chapter is based on existing research on elementary L2 writing. In addition, I have used knowledge gained through my research using SFL theory to encourage teachers to teach writing in mainstream classrooms with large percentages of bilingual learners of a variety of language groups. I have disseminated this work through conferences and publications are forthcoming.

3. The term heritage language is used because with young children of culturally and linguistic diverse family, this is not always their first language, or their only first language.

4. I have strongly discouraged teachers to tell children to start texts with a question, a habit that has been disseminated in Writers’ Workshop. Upon analysis of a number of published historical recounts, I showed teachers that none starts with a question.

References


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