

Preface

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Learning-to-Write and Writing-to-Learn in an Additional Language

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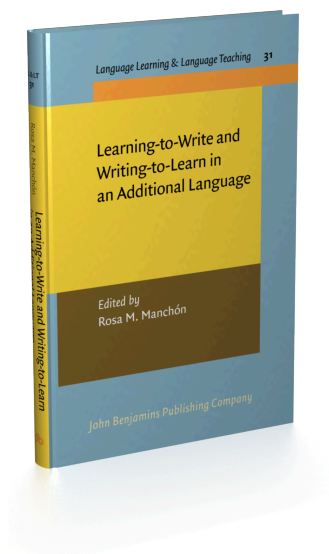
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Preface

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Inquiry into writing in second or foreign languages has always involved – and may even be defined by – dialogues among diverse interests and contrary assumptions. Studies of writing, composition, or rhetoric have tended to assume that a single language (often, English) is constant, but studies of writing in second or foreign languages (L2 writing) complicate this assumption, demonstrating how language and cultural variability and change are increasingly the norms around the world, particularly in academic and work situations. Studies of second language acquisition, in turn, have tended to assume that oral communication is the standard medium to evaluate learners' language development, but studies of L2 writing complicate this assumption, showing how writing can be a more valued ability (than oral proficiency) in, for example, classroom or academic contexts, or how L2 learners past the age of childhood use literate resources effectively and integrally in ways that are not possible in the early acquisition of a first language.

These kinds of contrary dialogues tend to be embraced and enacted by the practicing educators, programs, and curricula that draw eclectically on an array of pedagogical resources, approaches, and concepts to guide the teaching of L2 writing (Leki, Cumming & Silva 2008). Over the past few decades, the extent of activity focused on L2 writing has increased enormously, following from increased international mobility and communications, such that studies of L2 writing have become institutionalized in many educational programs, through scholarly and professional associations and publications, and in the form of certification for teachers and basic requirements for advanced research degrees and scholarly investigations. An inevitable consequence of this increased activity and institutionalization is serious deliberation over key concepts as well as systematic research into their fundamental nature.

The present book brings together and evaluates one of these central dialogues about the nature of L2 writing. Contributors address the fundamental and intriguing paradox that L2 writing is not only an ability to acquire, teach, and assess – as is conventionally assumed – but L2 writing is also a means, context, and basis for

learning, both of language and of writing. The central dialogue here is between theories, research, and educational practices on second language acquisition and on written composition. But a multiplicity of dialogues about other fundamental issues inevitably arises: What is learning? What is writing? What is language? What is multilingualism? What is identity in social contexts? What are optimal educational practices? How and why should we understand and distinguish all of these issues as well as their interactions?

An aspect of this dialogue that has personally intrigued me are certain thinking processes that are evident, particularly through think-aloud protocols, as people write in a second language. As I observed in Cumming (1990), and as Murphy and Roca de Larios (2010) have investigated more recently in greater depth, when composing earnestly in a second language people exert remarkable mental effort to search for the best words, ensure the accuracy of their language and rhetoric, and to overcome knowledge lacks. As they do, writers use an array of resources in their first and second languages, analyze their explicit knowledge about writing and grammar, and constantly evaluate and adjust their situational intentions. These cognitive activities are surely a strategic means of controlling one's own text production. Accumulatively over time and experience, they must also represent complex and emergent ways of creating, consolidating, evaluating, making automatic, restructuring, and extending one's knowledge about language as well as one's writing abilities (cf. Ellis & Larsen-Freeman 2009). These self-control or inner-speech dimensions become evident through think-aloud protocols, but they are prompted by the nature of writing itself, which sets a context for language production at a self-controlled pace, in relation to a fixed text that demands evaluation and so editing, and with a premium on effective and accurate communication to suit specific purposes. These cognitive processes must happen during oral communications as well, though perhaps with less time, deliberation, or opportunities. Moreover, as my colleague Merrill Swain and others (e.g., Swain & Lapkin 1995) have demonstrated, peer collaborations while writing or performing other language tasks are also optimal contexts to elicit and scaffold these potentials for learning inter-subjectively – forming a kind of paradigm for organizing second language and literacy learning.

A crucial point that the present book makes evident is the extent to which this paradigm necessarily extends along numerous, interacting dimensions. Language, literacy, and learning have to be recognized to function at multiple levels, ranging from micro-levels of words, orthographies, punctuation, morphology, syntax, and ideas to macro-levels of register, rhetoric, positioning oneself in discourse communities, establishing identities, acculturation, and social action. Chapters in the present book take up and extend this dialogue of multiplicity through an exemplary blend of theories, research, and analyses of practices in education and

written literacy. Rosa Manchón has marshaled together leading scholars from around the world to review key concepts and to present results from new research on L2 writing and learning from these perspectives. Lourdes Ortega's concluding chapter, in turn, neatly points out why these matters warrant serious attention as well as clarification: Misalignments can occur because students, teachers, researchers, or institutional programs may have differing purposes related to L2 writing, but these divergences can be reconciled through synergies between the complementary purposes for writing, language learning, and teaching exemplified in the book.

The opening chapter by Rosa Manchón and the closing chapter by Lourdes Ortega already summarize, eloquently and insightfully, the book's contents, but I feel obliged to offer impressions of those aspects of individual chapters that most captured my attention. Ken Hyland is particularly cogent and comprehensive in reviewing major trends about "learning to write", while nudging genre theory a few steps further forward. Alan Hirvela's chapter provides a neat counterpoint to Hyland's, recounting how an alternative strand of interests in "writing to learn" surfaced several decades ago, proliferated, and has subtly transformed how educators and researchers need to think. Rosa Manchón's review chapter concludes the first half of the book by analyzing these issues in depth, showing how they connect to, align with, and enrich theories about learning languages, proposing benefits for writing and collaboration that have been neglected by the predominant focus on studies of individuals' oral communications.

The second half of the volume presents a range of empirical studies, each using innovative research approaches that produce notable findings. This is where the larger dialogue about "writing to learn" and "learning to write" particularly jells. Ilona Leki's study convinced me to teach from what students know, which she shows can be substantially more than is usually presumed. Suresh Canagarajah's chapter expanded my thinking about multilingual writing in multiple and subtle ways. Heidi Byrnes reminded me how rhetorically complex summary writing really is, and also how comprehensive a theory systemic-functional linguistics is. Fiona Hyland's research convinced me, once again, that language learning and writing have to be conceptualized more broadly and deeply than simply as teachers' feedback on students' performances. The study by Rosa Manchón and Julio Roca de Larios affirmed that learning occurs in diverse, intricate, and often unacknowledged ways while writing in an additional language. John Hedgcock and Natalie Lefkowitz made it clear that curricular decisions need to account decisively for the complexity of students' backgrounds, abilities, and aspirations because these can vary on fundamental bases even for a single language taught in a single institution.

One could simply consider these multiple dialogues as integral lessons for senior students who are aspiring researchers. But the conversations, complexities, and issues that they open up go well beyond academic issues or any single language or educational situation. They establish the groundwork and rationales to prepare new investigations into and to form new perspectives on the relationships between writing, language, and learning in diverse contexts and among varied populations around the world. These dialogues need to and surely will continue, extending rather than confining the multiple boundaries of language and literacy learning, teaching, and development.

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