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POSITION/FOCUS PAPER

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L2 Writing and linguistic development: Measuring written output



In this presentation I focus on linguistic development through L2 writing rather than on-shot performance and explore research orientations that, though benefiting from past efforts, may well constitute new directions. Also, while an increasing array of assessment or measurement approaches and tools necessarily play a prominent role, that role is best fulfilled when they are able to capture the considerable variation that is characteristic for development even within a discernible overall trajectory, thus enabling us to interpret its meaning and significance. In my presentation I will further explore these matters in four areas:

First, since L2 writing and L2 development are phenomena that are of particular interest in and tend to occur in educational settings, an overarching consideration for any useable and useful writing research is to acknowledge and begin to specify the crucial role that an educational or, more precisely a particular programmatic context plays in fostering, observing/describing, and measuring writing as process and product over an extended period of time. In other words, while task, modality, and written corrective feedback have provided useful theoretical and empirical frames of reference, their contributions to development is likely to be interpretable only in a programmatic context, a kind of framing that interweaves emic perspectives, which have dominated much of research, with etic perspectives of a particular programs' approach to writing development. Such a programmatic framing could begin to give the pervasive call for longitudinal studies the kind of educational—and at the same time—theoretical and intellectual heft that it all too often lacks.

Second, because L2 writing and L2 linguistic development are always and inherently about meaning, future research into L2 development in writing might find it useful to ground its engagement with writing development in a functional, that is, a meaning-oriented theory of language rather than one that, at heart, is purely form oriented.

Third, taken together, these two approaches should enable writing researchers to arrive at well-motivated different grain sizes for their investigations at different points of the fundamentally long-term quality of writing development. An ability to adjust one's investigatory lens in a theoretically motivated fashion—zooming in and zooming out to capture key aspects of L2 linguistic development at all levels of the semiotic system language and with different modalities and genres—will be both key challenge and exciting opportunity for the writing field.

Finally, as L2 writers are increasingly seen as multilingually competent, what constitutes quality non-native writing at different stages of their L2 writing and their L2 linguistic development, will require the very evidence that educationally informed inquiry into writing development would seem to be particularly well equipped to provide.