

Theorizing Composition

A Critical Sourcebook of Theory
and Scholarship in Contemporary
Composition Studies

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GEORGE E. NEWELL

SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING THEORY

Summary

There is no single theory of writing in a second language. The purpose of this discussion, therefore, is to provide a historical review of paradigm shifts that have shaped second language writing theory and practice. These shifts have been framed by changing conceptions of language in the field of linguistics and of learning in the field of psychology.

Throughout the earlier part of the century, the dominant conception of language was structural in character. In the American context, this approach aimed for a close accounting of the phonological, morphological, and syntactic structures found in languages through detailed fieldwork, which placed an emphasis on oral forms. This conception of language, tied to behaviorist psychology, yielded a distinct brand of language pedagogy. Specifically, language learning was viewed as a process of habit formation in which the structural patterns of language could be learned through operant conditioning. The primacy of oral language meant that literacy was used mainly to reinforce oral patterns. For example, in beginning and intermediate language courses, literacy practices often were limited to completing sentence drills and other grammar-based exercises. Once students learned to correctly control oral patterns, attention was paid to increasingly longer chunks of text through "controlled" composition activities (e.g., Paulston and Dykstra). The movement of instruction from the sentence level to the paragraph level, and finally to the essay level was informed by research in the area of contrastive rhetoric. For example, Robert Kaplan suggested that the writing of second language learners (L2) may seem out of focus because L2 writers are employing or "transferring" rhetorical conventions associated with norms from their linguistic and cultural backgrounds—conven-

tions that are not linear and explicit in ways that English academic writing is. Kaplan's suggestion for practice involved L2 writers analyzing and practicing rhetorical structures representative of English thought patterns.

By the late 1950s, Noam Chomsky had challenged many of the assumptions of structural linguistics and behaviorist theories of language learning. He suggested that language learning is more complex than the formation of verbal habits. As a point of departure, Chomsky posited the existence of an innate language learning faculty capable of extracting a finite set of linguistic rules from exposure to natural speech. Chomsky's theory of language, coupled with prevailing theories of learning from cognitive psychology, suggested that attention should be paid to the internal cognitive processes through which individuals understand their complex environments. Collectively, these trends resulted in a paradigm shift away from a focus on the formal properties of texts in favor of a focus on the internal cognitive processes of meaning construction in the minds of writer/readers. Following the work of Janet Emig, Linda Flower, and John Hayes (Emig; Flower and Hayes), who studied the composing process of writers in their first language, L2 theorists such as Vivian Zamel investigated the writing process of second language learners. These investigations revealed a number of findings regarding the ways in which L2 writers discover meaning and solve problems of form and function. Specifically, studies suggested the composing process of L2 writers, like that of first language (L1) writers, is nonformulaic, exploratory, recursive, and generative. In classroom practice, these findings urged teachers to instruct students in planning, drafting, reviewing, revising, and editing (e.g., Krapels).

Critics of the cognitive perspective, such as John Swales, argued that the process approach focuses too much on the individual writer and the cognitive relationship between the writer and the writer's internal world, at the expense of understanding the social context in which he or she is situated. With theoretical antecedents to the work of Dell Hymes in linguistics and Lev Vygotsky in psychology, Swales and others suggest a more social orientation to understanding writing. Specifically, James Gee argued that language and learning should not be cast as an intrapersonal cognitive phenomenon but rather as a set of interpersonal, socially constructed, situated practices. Attention to the social context of writing yielded a new approach to understanding L2 composition. That is, theorists framed learning to write as a process of socialization into the literacy practices of a specific group or discourse community. Given this perspective, the task of the composition instructor is to apprentice a newcomer into a discourse community by analyzing the patterns of language use and thought common to a specified discipline. Such a perspective has given rise to a renewed interest in contrastive rhetoric and genre theory as well as a number of instructional programs focusing on "English for Specific Purposes" (ESP) or "English for Academic Purposes" (EAP). Critics of EAP and ESP, such as Patricia Bizzell, argued that it falsely positions second language writers as novices and native speaking readers as experts, when in fact they represent competing social

classes. In a similar vein, Nystrand, Greene, and Wiemelt suggested that it is specious to assume students can gain entry into disciplines if they merely learn the right forms and conventions. Researchers who are more wedded to a process perspective (e.g., Raimes) counter that a genre perspective rarefies discourse structures as well as power structures and leads to instruction that is overly form driven.

Reception and Significance in Composition Studies

A review of the literature suggests three issues. First, as Ann Raimes highlights, too many discussions of L2 literacy construct the L2 writer in "generalized" terms that gloss over important differences regarding L1 literacy, L2 language proficiency, age, gender, and cultural background (420). Tony Silva raises a second concern in a discussion of the overextended assumption that L1 and L2 writing are essentially the same phenomenon (657). Third is the extent to which L2 writing theorists have adequately addressed the connection between orality and literacy and the role L2 writing development plays in a general theoretical accounting of second language acquisition.

Shifting paradigms regarding the nature of L2 writing have had the most impact on classrooms at the postsecondary level but current debates have added a needed political dimension to a discussion of L2 writing theory. Such debates provide new terrain for exploring the connection between L2 literacy practices and issues of power and identity (e.g., Weinstein-Shr).

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MEG L. GEBHARD

SEMIOTICS/CONSTRUCTIVIST SEMIOTICS/ SOCIAL SEMIOTICS

Summary

Understood as the study and science of sign systems in language, *semiotics* is derived from Greek *simeion* (sign) and *semeiotikos* (one who interprets or divines the meaning of signs). Traditionally, sign study is divided into three areas—syntactics, the study of grammar; semantics, the study of meaning; and pragmatics, the study of the actual purposes and effects of meaningful utterances. In the twentieth century, the theories of Charles Sanders Peirce and Ferdinand de Saussure most significantly influenced the evolution and direction of contemporary semiotics. In the 1950s, the discipline developed a sociopolitical dimension when Roland Barthes applied semiotics to French popular culture, identifying the underlying ideological and mythological power of signs. Arguing for American language instruction that emphasizes critical reading and writing skills to serve as a foundation for participation in public life, James Berlin proposed that composition courses must surely include an analysis of cultural phenomena using semiotic strategies to uncover the interested and ideological nature of discourse.

In general, a *sign* is any information-bearing entity, such as road signs, maps, mathematical equations, animal sounds, and so on. Signs contain two distinct, inseparable parts—the signifier (a set of marks on a page, speech sounds, or hand signals) and the signified (the concept, idea, and meaning). Swiss structural linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) defined the study of signs within society, or *semiology*, as the contrast between elements and relationships as embodied in language. Because a sign derives its meaning and significance from its relationship to other signs within an entire system, it is the *difference* between the objective structure of signs and their governing laws that become the focus of Saussure's *oeuvre*. Thus, *langue*, or formal language, is the domain of linguistics. Recognizing that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and unnatural, signs derive their communicative power from socially established, rule-governed rituals. In addition, language use, as organized through a system of formal relations, is not arbitrary. The relationship between the signifier and signified is usually socially, historically, and culturally determined. Therefore, the actual use of language in communication, or *parole*, which