**Understanding Writing - From Theory to Practice in Second Language (L2) Contexts**

Introduction: The Evolution of Writing in Applied Linguistics

Good morning, everyone. Today, we are going to explore the fascinating and complex world of writing, particularly in the context of second language (L2) learning. Writing has always been a part of applied linguistics, but its role and significance have evolved significantly over time.

Early Views: In the early years of applied linguistics, writing was primarily seen as a means of monitoring students' language production and providing linguistic material, especially when sound recording technology was not widely available. It was not considered a primary goal of language learning but rather a tool to support speaking.

Shift in Perspective: In the latter half of the 20th century, writing began to receive significant attention as an important area of inquiry within applied linguistics. This shift was driven by the growth of composition studies in the USA and the parallel development of the field of second language writing. Writing became an important focus of research and instruction in both first language (L1) and L2 contexts.

Interdisciplinary Nature: More recently, the recognition of the complexity of writing and writing instruction has led to second language writing evolving into an interdisciplinary field involving applied linguistics, composition studies, and other related disciplines.

Key Aspects of Writing

Writing is a complex process that involves more than just putting words on paper. It encompasses several key aspects:

1. Modes of Linguistic Expression:

Writing is one of the three modes of linguistic expression, alongside speaking and signing. It is not merely a representation of speech but a distinct manifestation of language users' knowledge, perspective, and communicative competence.

2. Writing as a Process and Product:

Writing is both a noun and a verb. It refers to both the written text (the product) and the act of constructing written texts (the process).

3. Rhetorical Situation:

Writing is always embedded in a rhetorical situation, which includes the writer, the reader, the text, and reality. These elements are in constant interaction and influence the writing process.

4. Relational Aspect:

Writer: The writer's identity is co-constructed with the reader through the text. Writers must negotiate their view of reality with the reader's perspective.

Reader: Readers can play various roles (e.g., friend, critic, evaluator) and may be real or imagined.

Text: Each text is unique but is also situated within a network of other texts. Writers often draw on existing discourse practices to create new texts.

Reality: Reality is interpreted through language and other semiotic systems. Writers construct and negotiate versions of reality within the text.

5. Strategic Aspect:

Writers use various strategies (heuristics) to assess the rhetorical situation and develop written text. These strategies include:

Exploration: Techniques like clustering, free writing, and the "5W1H" method help writers explore and develop ideas.

Rhetorical Appeals: Writers consider ethos (credibility), pathos (emotional appeal), and logos (logical appeal) to persuade readers.

Drafting and Revision: Writers often go through multiple drafts, revising based on feedback and their own reflections. The process is recursive rather than linear.

6. Textual Aspect:

The textual aspect is the material realization of the relational and strategic aspects. It involves:

Cohesion: Sentences are connected through cohesive devices (e.g., pronouns, conjunctions) to create a flow of ideas.

Coherence: The text must be conceptually consistent and make sense within the rhetorical context.

Discursive Identity: Writers construct their voice through the use of language features and alignment with discursive networks.

Typographical Features: In formal writing, typographical features (e.g., punctuation, italics) are used to convey meaning.

Defining Second Language Writers

Defining second language writers is challenging due to the diversity of their backgrounds, characteristics, needs, and goals. Key points include:

Broad Definition: The term "second language writer" includes anyone writing or learning to write in a language other than their native language, encompassing second, foreign, third, fourth, and additional language writers.

Fuzzy Boundaries: The distinction between L1 and L2 writers is not always clear, as the concept of a "native speaker" is contested, and users of different language varieties face similar challenges.

Writing as a Learned Skill: Unlike speech, writing is not acquired naturally but through explicit instruction. All writers, regardless of language, continue to develop their language proficiency and genre knowledge.

L1 vs. L2 Writing: While writing in a second language is distinct from L1 writing and may be perceived as simpler and less effective by L1 readers, the difference is largely a matter of degree.

Major Approaches to Second Language Writing

Several key approaches have shaped the field of second language writing over the past 50 years:

1. Controlled Composition:

Originating from the audiolingual approach, this method emphasizes habit formation and formal accuracy. Writing is seen as reinforcement for oral habits.

Focus: Avoiding errors and reinforcing appropriate language behavior through imitation and manipulation of model passages.

Criticism: Neglects the importance of ideas, organization, and style.

2. Paragraph Pattern Approach:

Recognizes the need for second language writers to produce extended texts and emphasizes organization at the paragraph and essay levels.

Focus: Logical construction and arrangement of discourse forms, with a focus on paragraph elements and development options.

Contrastive Rhetoric: Explores how cultural thought patterns are reflected in writing and how different cultures emphasize writer or reader responsibility.

3. Process Approach:

Reacting to the limitations of controlled composition and the paragraph pattern approach, the process approach views writing as a recursive, exploratory, and generative process.

Focus: The writer's composing process, including planning, drafting, revising, and editing. The emphasis is on developing effective writing strategies.

Classroom: Provides a supportive and collaborative environment with minimal interference to allow students to work through their processes.

4. Genre-Based Approach:

Emerges from dissatisfaction with the process approach, particularly its lack of focus on audience and genre.

Focus: Understanding the expectations and conventions of specific discourse communities, particularly in academic and professional contexts.

Academic Purposes: Emphasizes the production of texts that meet the standards of English-medium higher education institutions.

Issues that Transcend Approaches

Several important issues transcend the various approaches to second language writing:

1. Programmatic Issues:

Includes program administration, needs analysis, placement, and assessment. Assessment is a particularly significant area, with discussions on test types, rating, validity, reliability, and variables affecting ratings.

2. Contextual Issues:

Describes various instructional contexts, such as academic discourse communities, specific program types, and private sector contexts.

3. Disciplinary and Political Issues:

Involves the nature of second language writing as a discipline, its relationship with other fields, and the impact of postmodern thought, social constructionist inquiry, and critical theory on the field.

Current Trends and Future Directions

The field of second language writing is currently in a state of reflection and re-examination. Key trends include:

Rejection of Easy Answers: Professionals are moving away from simplistic approaches and seeking more nuanced understandings of writing and writing instruction.

Synthesis and Model Building: There is a push to integrate findings from different areas and build comprehensive models of writing.

Critical Reflection: Practitioners are encouraged to critically evaluate research findings and make informed decisions about their teaching practices.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration: The field is becoming more interdisciplinary, drawing on insights from various disciplines to enrich understanding and practice.