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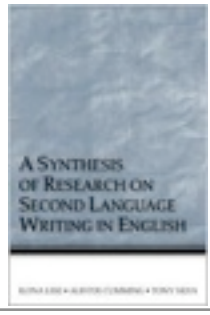
A Synthesis of Research on Second Language Writing In English			
Author:	Ilona Leki, Alister Cumming & Tony Silva (2008)		
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In such an explosively growing field as L2 writing so many subdisciplinary areas have evolved that even specialists might find it difficult to stay up to date on findings outside their primary research interests. Leki, Cumming and Silva's compendium could be just what such subspecialists are looking for; it is also intended for novice researchers, graduate students, teacher educators, and program administrators.

A Synthesis of Research on Second Language Writing in English is a topical introduction to research in second language (L2) writing in North America from 1980 to 2005. The three authors have produced an organized (by subject headings) and rigorously well-annotated bibliography contextualizing research within major trends and developments. Here's a sample of the format:

> In L2 texts, lexical cohesive features were the most common (Liu & Braine, 2005; M. Zhang, 2000); they were much more common than grammatical ties (P. Johnson, 1992; Khalil, 1989) and were followed by conjunction and reference cohesion (P. Johnson, 1992; Liu & Braine, 2005; M. Zhang, 2000). (p. 142)

The book's 20 chapters comprise research findings as well as key research themes and issues in the field and are organized into three sections: (I) Context for L2 Writing; (II) Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment; and (III) Basic Research on Writers, Their Composing Processes, and Their Texts.

Given that L2 writing specialists acknowledge that analyzing English learners' written production, or language development, without situating it in a human, material, institutional, and political context is counterproductive, Section I explores broad situational issues. The case studies, surveys, questionnaires, and interviews examined here describe the ecology of L2 writing: writers' struggles and motivations, the contextual difficulties they have to confront, and the strategies they employ to cope with them.

Chapters 1-4 review research in formal educational contexts. These school settings range from pre-kindergarten to graduate school in English-medium institutions in North America. Although the authors stress the importance and impact of setting, they cautiously avoid dividing and treating the writers themselves as administrative groupings; instead the labels used above to describe learning situations correspond to the different demands the writers perceive, experience, and respond to, so that the importance and impact of context is seen from the writer's standpoint. The bulk of the research in this area has considered L2 undergraduates chiefly in terms of urgency in preparing them for tasks delineated in the curriculum. Of special interest for the target readership is Chapter 4, which describes the shift in emphasis since the 1990s onto graduate students and their writing, especially the mismatch between students' disciplinary expertise and their lower degree of awareness of language, writing, or cultural discourse norms.

Chapters 5-7 discuss settings beyond school—in the community, workplace, and scholarly profession, including publishing in English. The issues emerging from the research on immigrant and resettlement writers include the nature of the demands for literacy, and the content and focus of adult L2 literacy classes. Since writing at the workplace is often easily avoided, the authors include studies with significant findings about the social and interpersonal components of workplace writing. For example, Chapter 6 covers writing for science and technology or for industry, and discusses research on, say, how L1 and L2 writers respond differently to writing demands. Researchers as participants in their own and other researchers' studies have voiced their concerns:

> [. . .] despite their L2 language fluency, as some scholars noted with embarrassment or irritation (J. Flowerdew, 2000; Curry & Lillis, 2004; Parkhurst, 1992), their manuscripts may be criticized by reviewers and editors with such comments as, "Obviously, . . . not . . . written by a native speaker. There are some problems with language usage" (Flowerdew, 2000, p. 135). Furthermore, except for L2 writers who were also linguists, applied linguists, or otherwise involved in language education, other authors of L2 publications were reported to have no interest in language learning and wished only to get their research published, doing whatever that required in an English-dominated publishing world. (p. 58)

From another angle, Shi's (2003) article cited by the authors is a collection of professionals' views on scholarly publications uncovering the negative consequences of English displacing all other languages in scholarly communication as well as distorting scientific knowledge. Gosden provides an example to illustrate this point: After working long and hard at the language level of his research article, an L2 physicist commented on his work as being "well organized in English, but bad in Physics" (1996, p. 125). Paradoxically, the authors point out, the same L2 graduate student will return home equipped with an understanding and familiarity with the English language and with the world of English publishing to further confirm the dominance of English.

The closing part of Section I, Chapter 8, deals with the context for the ideological issues that surround and permeate L2 writing in English in North America. Rather than suggesting a working definition of ideological, the writers discuss the hottest issues that have surfaced: (1) the hegemony of English; (2) the role of a critical perspective in L2 writing instruction; (3) the political role of EAP; (4) the challenge of World Englishes; (5) the relationships among literate identities; (6) the intersection of L2 writing with gender, class, race, and sexual orientation. Equity for L2 writers and the ethics around the export of English have been two of the focal areas explored since the 1990s. As a result, the authors conclude, much research now overtly recognises the ideological dimensions of L2 writing contexts. In particular, different studies on voice in writing stress identity as both created and suppressed. Hawkins (2005) and Toohey (2000) showed how some identity categories were made available to individual children. Even though these labels predetermined success or failure, the children sometimes tried to resist them.

Section II highlights educational issues grounded in theory and teacher orientations, and those about testing and assessment.

- Chapter 9, applying a top-down approach, first looks at the conceptual foundations of L2 writing curricula, then at the purposes for implementing such plans, and lastly, organizational patterns. Genre theory, rhetoric, sociocultural theory, language socialisation, and new literacies stand out as the most influential guiding concepts in a diversity of contexts where curriculum organization is pragmatic and eclectic. Leki el al. suggest that, besides continuing with these approaches, current curriculum standards should be analyzed and evaluated, and new ones should be proposed. They call for reinventing curriculum standards, after having scanned recent research and concluded that few substantive guidelines for curriculum design and L2 literacy instruction have surfaced.

- Chapter 10 reviews the extensive research on testing and assessment of L2 writing. Just as there are two distinct cultures regarding the purposes for assessing L2 writing, the chapter is divided into one section dealing with formative assessment in classrooms and other pedagogical settings; and another devoted to the analysis of exams, formal tests and institutional policies. Growing concern in this domain about accountability, fairness, and validity has triggered research yielding valuable information about teachers' responses to students' writing, peer- and self-assessment, test design, validation, and evaluation.

The focus of Section III is the findings of recent empirical research on L2 writing. The synthesis of books, book chapters, and journal articles in the four chapters here covers L2 writers and their composing processes and written texts. The authors propose two ways of using this section. If read as a whole, it can give a general overview of the body of research literature. Alternatively, it can function as "a sort of prose da-

tabase" (p. 96) referring the researcher to relevant studies in particular areas of interest.

- Chapter 11 centers on the L2 writer variables that have emerged from research findings: (1) L2 variables, (2) L1 variables, (3) transfer, (4) psychological and social variables, and (5) demographic variables, each with its own subcategories. One pitfall here is that the majority of the findings reported were supported only by a single study.

- Chapter 12 deals with L2 composing process variables. The six most important categories here are (1) revising, (2) planning, (3) general composing processes, (4) formulating, (5) translating, and (6) restructuring. The conclusion to be drawn is that more successful L2 writers did more of everything. They rewrote, planned, and elaborated their ideas more; used their dictionaries; and translated less. Additionally, as most empirical studies found that L1 and L2 writing processes were similar, high achievement in writing was not primarily language dependent, even though language was a factor that limited performance.

- Chapters 13 and 14 describe the written products themselves. A discussion of textual issues, like cohesion, organizational patterns or modes, is followed by an analysis of grammatical issues, for example parts of speech, sentence elements or sentence processes—to name the most frequent findings.

Following Section III are two tables that should be particularly useful for researchers. While Table I is an alphabetical list of the studies cited, Table II is a chronological listing of the same studies. Both enumerate (a) authors, (b) year of publication, (c) number of participants, (d) participants' L1, and (e) participants' L2. Once the target study is located, a neat 50-page long APA-style bibliography will direct the interested reader to where he or she can access the publication in question.

A Synthesis of Research on Second Language Writing in English is no bedtime reading—unless, of course, one is an insomniac. But it is an indispensable reference tool for any professional specialising in the field.

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