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**EFFECTIVE AND INEFFECTIVE WRITING IN
ENGLISH AND CHINESE :
A PROCESS APPROACH**

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**Effective and Ineffective Writing
in English and Chinese:
A Process Approach**

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Introduction - The winds of change

Until recent years, the bulk of second language research studies has concentrated on the input to the learners and little on what is going on in the learners themselves (Ervin-Tripp, 1978). Reid & Hresko (1981) stress that

... it is important to consider what happens *internally* to a person who is learning and to view learning as *construction*. It is the learner who is the most important element in the teaching-learning situation; not materials, lessons, teachers, or other factors external to the learner.

(p. 49)

This cognitive approach places importance on the **active** learning on the part of the learner, that is, the **strategies** used in the learning process. Thus, in the 1970s and 1980s, we see the emphasis in writing research shift from one that focussed on prescription and the end product, to one that focusses on the *process*, with the stress on the cognitive development involved (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987b; Cooper & Matsuhashi, 1983; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Bracewell, 1980; Barritt & Kroll, 1978).

This shift in emphasis from product to process in writing research necessitates a methodology which will enable the researcher to "enter the writer's head" as it were.

Hosenfeld's (1976) ground-breaking article reveals, for the first

time, such a methodology by using think-aloud protocols.

The study

Forty-three Sec 3 students in Singapore were asked to write an expository essay in English and in Chinese, and to think aloud as they wrote. Using a revised version of Langer's (1986) Analysis of Meaning Construction Procedure, the protocols were analyzed for the meaning-constructing strategies used while writing in these two orthographically different languages.

Results and discussion

Effective writers

The effective writers of English engage in meta-comments on the content, and are not unduly concerned about technical details. They give equal attention to both parts of the writing task, providing plenty of schemata and backing these up with evidence and personalized experiences. They ask questions during the course of the writing. Their writing flows smoothly, with plenty of schematic links. They consider it important to monitor what has been written. For this purpose, an inner dialogue allows them to "hear" and evaluate the clarity of their writing. When they read and re-read what they have written, they concentrate on global changes, and revise if the meaning has been wrongly constructed. For them, revising is a process of structuring and shaping their discourse. As confirmed by subsequent interviews, they are the effective writers reviewed in the literature who are guided by goals, and are equipped with plans and strategies to realize these goals (Scardamalia &

Bereiter, 1985; Flower & Hayes, 1980).

The effective writers of Chinese employ the same meaning-constructing strategies except for one significant difference - instead of glossing over the technical details during the process of writing as they do when they write in English, they take pains to monitor and check that the Chinese characters have been written correctly. This reflects the way Chinese is currently being taught in Singapore - with great emphasis on accuracy, so good students take pains to check that they have constructed the intended meaning with the right characters. When they do not know how to write a certain character, many turn to using hanyu pinyin, thus pointing to the possibility that they might find it easier to study via sound than via sight, the latter demanding more memory work. Another strategy that effective writers in Chinese use is to try rephrasing in order to avoid using that character.

It appears that when writers are effective only in English, they are able to transfer their cognitive skills from English (their stronger language) to Chinese (their weaker language), thus confirming that linguistic interdependence is at work.

Ineffective writers

Despite their lack of proficiency in one/both languages, the data shows that the ineffective writers of both languages also ask questions during the course of their writing. Their expository texts are also relatively balanced in both schemata

and personalized experiences. Though some do pause occasionally to reflect metacognitively about their writing, on the whole, their goals are short-term, which result in them surviving from sentence to sentence. It is therefore not surprising that the flow of their writing is more jerky when compared to that produced by the effective writers, and there are markedly fewer schematic links. They have an undeveloped image of their rhetorical problem, and are the ones who, according to Bartlett (1982), cannot exactly pinpoint what the problem is.

They tend to pay more attention to low-level mechanical and grammatical changes rather than to the organizational and rhetorical aspects of the text. It is possible that their teachers, thinking that that is the only way for them to improve their writing in English, have been emphasizing grammatical accuracy to them. In addition, many English teachers in Singapore are more comfortable with the product-approach rather than the process-approach as the latter demands individual time with the students, and, more importantly, expertise in the language, a qualification that some of them might feel they lack.

In addition, the ineffective writers of Chinese show that they are careless and slipshod when they write in that language. Chinese vocabulary seems to be a major problem. Most of them leave blanks in their Chinese writing task if they do not know how to write certain characters.

It is possible that because English is the language of

academic activities for students in Singapore (given the fact that it is the medium of instruction in all schools), students who are proficient in Chinese but not proficient in English are handicapped in this study because of their lack of content knowledge in English. In other words, because this study looks only at decontextualized language via writing, students who are proficient in English can subsequently transfer the strategies to Chinese, their weaker language. However, those proficient in Chinese (and because the proficiency is in interpersonal activities) have more difficulties transferring strategies from Chinese to academic English.

Implications for language teachers in Singapore

All in all, then, it would appear that whether it is for writing in English or in Chinese, the effective writers engage various strategies to improve meaning construction, and tend to place less emphasis on surface details. The less effective writers seem to engage in these behaviors as well, but the quality of these behaviors is different. In addition, these less effective writers tend to be more concerned about the cosmetic appearance of the text.

It is encouraging to note that there are several instances of thinking and monitoring in the other language while writing in one. This is particularly obvious for the students who are proficient in English but not in Chinese. because they are able to use their stronger language, English, to help them when they write in their weaker language, Chinese.

Language teachers in Singapore can play an important role in guiding less effective writers on how to make use of meaning-constructing strategies. The learners may lack systematic strategies necessary for finding a focus and a beginning (as some students in this study have shown when writing in Chinese), and need to be taught how to explore topics, develop ideas and discover relationships. In other words, they must be taught how to graduate from what Bereiter & Scardamalia (1987a) call the "knowledge-telling" stage to the "knowledge-processing" stage. To start with, tasks should be within their "zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1962) so that they can claim ownership to their writing tasks.

The findings in this study show that effective and ineffective writers alike tend to correct grammatical mistakes when they are writing in English. It seems easier to spot rule-governed errors than it is to spot ambiguity (Bartlett, 1981). Witte (1983) suggests that perhaps unskilled writers tend to revise at the word or sentence level because they do not know how to evaluate texts as a whole, to respond to the overall semantic structure of the texts, or to evaluate the semantic structure against their intentions.

The traditional teaching model reinforces narrow and limited notions about the functions of writing: form takes precedence over meaning, and writing is viewed as being done for teachers to examine and to "slash" with their red pens. Language teachers should help ineffective writers break out of their obsession to

improve the cosmetic appearance of what they have written **at the expense** of meaning construction. For a start, therefore, perhaps teachers can be persuaded not to look for mistakes in these mechanical details. By concentrating on the *meaning* constructed, students will quickly learn that it is the latter that is primarily important, rather than the surface features.

Concluding remarks

The teacher's role should be one of providing instructional scaffolding that will equip students for life-long learning. Teachers who are truly collaborators, facilitators and enablers in every sense of the word will strive to raise their students' consciousness about strategies. They will help them to internalize the strategies, and provide them with the resources to eventually undertake similar tasks on their own.

Where language learning is concerned, they should convey the message that language can be exploited and manipulated to fit the clear expression of intended meanings. Language teachers should regard it as their responsibility to develop a mental life within their students - one in which mental effort is continually directed towards a construction of meaning. They should constantly remind themselves that

In learning to write, writers not only increase their knowledge of discourse conventions and specific literate practices, they build a repertory of thinking strategies, and - at times achieve a reflective awareness of their own constructive and interpretative processes.

(Flower, 1989, p. 285)

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