Symposium on Second-Language Writing Offers Insights for Editors

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Second-language writing is performed by a non-native writer of a language. There are increasing numbers of international students who are writers in English as a second language in colleges and universities in the United States, but there are also an important number of foreign-born US residents in public schools in the United States who are second-language writers. Many grew speaking other languages at home, in their communities, and in schools. Others acquired English when they were young and have used it with their native language.

The presence of second-language writers in the classroom has prompted research and pedagogic approaches. At first, writing was neglected in second-language studies, but later it was included in English-as-a-second-language programs in the 1960s. The field of second-language writing focused mostly on text structure in the 1970s. Second-language writing became an interdisciplinary field based on composition studies and second-language studies during the 1990s.

In 1998, the Symposium on Second Language Writing started with the purpose of bringing together researchers and teachers in second-language writing to discuss key issues and the future direction of second-language writing. The first Symposium on Second Language Writing was founded by Tony Silva, of Purdue University, and Paul Kei Matsuda, of Arizona State University, and took place at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana. There were 16 presentations, and all roughly 125 attendees sat in the same room and heard every presentation. In 2009, there were 170 sessions, colloquia, workshops, and so on and 263 speakers, presenters, chairs, and workshop leaders; there were about 400 attendees from 133 institutions in 19 countries.

In 2007, the symposium became an international event, being held for the first time outside the United States, in Nagoya, Japan. In 2010, it will again take place outside the United States, at the University of Murcia in Murcia, Spain. In 2009, the symposium was held on 5–7 November at Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona.

The 2009 symposium consisted of plenary sessions, concurrent sessions, invited colloquia, and two half-day workshops: “Treatment of Error in Second Language Writing”, led by Dana Ferris, and “Plagiarism vs Legitimate Textual Borrowing”, led by Christine Tardy.

The first workshop, on treatment of error in second-language writing, provided an overview of how errors or corrections should be handled. There has been a lot of controversy on this topic; some consider not providing feedback on error correction acceptable, and others believe that every error should be pointed out and corrected. The workshop included a review of the issues related to error correction and their implications for teaching and the techniques, approaches, and principles that could be used for error correction. Aspects that were addressed included corrective feedback, improvement of linguistic accuracy, language issues, and strategy training to permit students to become independent self-editors.

In the second workshop, Tardy provided activities for developing effective strategies for textual borrowing. The strategies included discussing plagiarism and examining patterns of text integration. Tardy also provided examples of plagiarism and legitimate text borrowing and asked participants to identify each. That was done to help teachers to distinguish copying from legitimate borrowing and, in this way, help students to make the distinctions. The workshop sparked many comments about plagiarism. Participants considered it a serious matter but mentioned the difficulty of identifying it in manuscripts. They also commented that it is common among second-language writers, usually because of their lack of skill in written English.

The plenary sessions were “The Future of Second Language Writing (and Reading) Instruction” by Ann M. Johns, of San Diego State University; “The Future Ain’t What It Used to Be” by Mark Warschauer, of the University of California, Irvine; “Exploring Learning Transfer in Second Language Writing Education” by Mark A. James, of Arizona State University; and “Second-Language Writing Research Across the Generations: It’s All in the Family” by Carole Edelsky, of Arizona State University, and Gail Shuck, of Boise State University.

The plenary sessions presented important points about second-language writing: how it is taught, the changes that have occurred, fostering student literacy research by using different types of text, and encouraging interaction among reading, writing, and technology; the history of computers and technology and how the development of wireless devices has influenced writing; how language is acquired and learning is transferred in English-as-a-second-language classes and in other learning contexts and the application of this knowledge beyond the learning environment; and how research in second-language writing has changed in the last 30 years.

During the concurrent sessions, participants from the United States and other countries presented research on different aspects of second-language writing. Among the many topics covered were peer review...
in the second-language writing classroom, feedback in writing, and the relationship between writing and speaking.

An interesting session was “How to Write for Academic Journals”, presented by Elsevier, which included useful information on how to get published in peer-reviewed journals and a question-and-answer period with journal editors. The session also offered information on how to write a scientific article, including the structure of a research article, the importance of the quality of the English language in an article, choosing a journal, peer review, and submission of an article.

A topic of another interesting session was writing centers. Writing centers provide tutoring in different aspects of writing, regardless of whether a writer is a native or non-native speaker of the language. Tutors are trained to provide assistance without doing the work for the student. They guide and suggest, encouraging the students to provide their own solutions to their problems. Researchers from writing centers in the United States and other countries also presented the results of their tutoring of second-language writers. One center at Tokyo International University trained and used as tutors exceptional undergraduate students who had knowledge of the language and previous studies in the United States. Students expressed satisfaction with the peer tutors and enjoyed the help provided by fellow students.

The teaching of second-language writing has changed, and more institutions include it in their curricula. Writing in English as a second language is common nowadays because graduate students and researchers in the United States and other countries are interested in publishing their work in international journals. Some do not have a firm grasp of the language or are not accustomed to writing in English. Because many peer-reviewed journals are published in English, it is imperative for researchers whose native language is not English to have knowledge in second-language writing, which often can best be obtained from well-trained professionals in the field of second-language writing. Events like the Symposium on Second Language Writing are essential to provide insight and research data on the subject, to improve the quality of writing, and to increase knowledge in second-language writing for instructors all over the world.

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