

## The Nature of Writing in English as a Foreign Language

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### Abstract :

Writing used to considered the preoccupation of the élite and the highly cultivated people, but this belief has changed because in the modern global community this ability to write has become an essential tool for people of all kinds and all levels; for instance, writing is used in composing academic essays, letters or e-mail messages. In fact, this capacity to write makes it easy for individuals from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to communicate effectively. It should be acknowledged that the importance of writing lies not only in the fact that it is used to transfer information but also to transform knowledge to create new knowledge. It is, therefore , of primary importance to students in academic settings to master this skill. In this paper, we will undertake to cover in details many definitions of writing as a skill and system. This paper also tries to analyse the nature of the writing skill in English and its interrelation with other skills. It also includes a brief history of the language beside a description of the socio-cultural and cognitive aspects of writing.

### ملخص:

في الماضي، كان ينظر للكتابة بوصفها انشغال نخبة من الناس والمتعلمين تعليما عاليا، ولكن هذا الاعتقاد قد تغير لأن الكتابة أصبحت وسيلة أساسية يمتلكها كل الناس على اختلاف ألوانهم و ألسنتهم و تمكن القدرة على الكتابة الناس من مختلف المرجعيات اللغوية والثقافية على التواصل بشكل فعال وفق استخدامات سليمة ، لنا ترقى الجامعات إلى تعليم الطالب (ة) وتمكنه من مهارة الكتابة وسنحاول في هذه الورقة البحثية أن نقف عند مجموعات من التعريفات التي تصنف الكتابة كمهارة وكنظام قائم بذاته إضافة إلى تحليل طبيعة هذه المهارة وعلاقتها بالمهارات اللغوية الأخرى مع ضرورة الوقوف عند الجوانب التاريخية للكتابة .

**Introduction:**

Writing appears to be a challenging activity whether done at school or as an everyday job. This is due to the fact that it is considered a recent way of expression compared to other forms like speaking. Because of the human need to communicate the oral form came first. For this reason, the written form has always remained last because people start language by speaking not by writing. The difficulty of writing lies in the fact that writers do not find it easy to progress in the writing process. Hence, writing is a basic skill in teaching and improving it requires from teachers to develop appropriate techniques and strategies which serve to motivate learners to develop their writing skill. This paper aims to introduce and to discuss some aspects that are relevant to the writing skill in English. Discussing those points will help us to have an overall idea about what theorists in the field of education have highlighted as far as writing in English is concerned.

**1. Definition of the writing skill**

Writing is a complex and an ongoing process. Robinson (2004) states that writing is a recent form of expression when compared to other forms like speaking ; in other words, all humans begin expressing themselves by speaking not by writing. Indeed, writing is not an accessible form of expression, especially for EFL students who find it very difficult to enhance their underdeveloped writing processes.

In fact, writing is a very difficult term to describe or to define. However, many experts tried to give their interpretations to this skill from different perspectives. Widowson (1978), Hornby (1974), and Troyka (1987) gave different definitions to writing (cited in “Teaching English Online”). Widowson , for instance , stated that writing is “the act of making up correct sentences and transmitting them through the visual medium as a mark on paper” (p.62).

Grabowski (1996), proposed a definition which relates writing effectively to academic and professional success when the noted that:

Writing can be seen as a more standardized system which must be acquired through special instruction .Mastery of this standard system is an important

Prerequisite of cultural and educational participation and maintenance of one's' right and duties (cited in Weigle, 2002, p.4).

Therefore, learning to write helps students to be able to participate in social activities beyond school or for some to be able to make of writing their future career. In addition to the previous definitions, Robinson (2004) emphasizes the mental aspect of the activity in her definition when she says that writing is not only a natural automatic operation but also a mental effort that needs continual training, a serious instruction and a continual practice. Robinson states further that this skill requires from the writer very complex mental processes such as: generating ideas, planning, goal setting, monitoring and evaluating what is going to be written. Besides, the writer attempts to find out the most effective language to express meaning .Weigle (2002) gives another dimension to writing when she says that writing makes it easy to individuals coming from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds to communicate effectively.

## **2. The writing system**

Writing is a system in which language is represented in visual or tactile way. It is also a method which uses symbols to replace the sounds of speech. This system of symbols may also use signs to represent accurately things as punctuation and numerals. Indeed, there are many definitions to the writing system, each of which targets one field of language. A set of definitions have been chosen from different sources. The writing system is the productive and communicative skill that is aimed to store, interchange and preserve messages. It is the kind of skills that survive beyond history by using written symbols .The Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Writing Systems (2008) describes writing as:

A set of visible or tactile signs used to represent units of language in a systematic way with the purpose of recording messages which can be retrieved by everyone who knows the language in question and the rules by virtue of which its units are encoded in the writing system(cited i What is writing-omniglot).

The above definition considers writing as a system of codes represented in the form of symbols in order to store information. This representation of language can be used by members of a linguistic community. Similarly, the online Encyclopaedia of World's Writing Systems defines writing as "A system of more or less permanent marks used to represent an utterance in such a way that it can be recovered more or less exactly without the intervention of the utterer". ( ibid) Steven Roger Fischer (2003) claims that there is no single definition that can describe the writing system and instead he gives some factors which must be covered by a complete writing system:

It must have its purpose of communication

1. It must consist of artificial graphic marks on a durable or electronic surface.
2. It must use marks that relate conventionally to articulate speech (the systematic arrangement of significant vocal sounds) or electronic programming in such a way that communication is achieved (p.12).

Rogers (2005) however, considers that writing is systematic in two ways: Firstly it has a systematic relationship to language, and secondly it has a systematic internal organization of its own (cited in Richard Nordquist). Rodgers goes on to explain, through examples what a writing system is when he says:

In our study of writing systems, we might assume that there is simple, one to one relationship between written symbols and language :for example that a writing system has symbols for each phoneme, and that these symbols are used to write utterances. In such situation, an automatic conversation would be possible between writing and language.

Differently stated, Rogers argues that some writing systems are regular but none is perfect, so there are varying degrees of complexity in each writing system. For example, if we consider the English language, there are such pairs as one and won with the same pronunciation and very different spellings (ibid).

### **3. Evolution of writing**

The human activity of writing is traced back to 5500 years ago when the archaeologist Richard Meadow made his great discovery in 1999 at a place called Harappa in a region where the great Harappan or Indo civilization once prospered. Meadow considered the symbols that he found one of the earliest writings, but it was stated that the inscription, though not clear in meaning, had similarities to what is known as the Indo script, the first recognized written language. According to Meadow since that time many writing systems have developed around the world (cited in Harmer, 2004, pp.1-2).

However, some other archaeologists think that writing started to exist from the Mesopotamia (old civilization of Egypt and pre-Columbian America) around 3500BC and it is due to the inscriptions found on stones and tablets that the development of written Language started to exist. Indeed, the drawings found in caves were considered as traditional art called pictogram (i.e. picture writing). According to Yule (2006), writing began from the time of the old civilization of Mesopotamia, and he advocates that there are six visual graphics which prove that fact: "Ritualistic marking found in caves, tallying devices to keep count, property marking\_Indicating owners , token and totems as symbols Indicating owners , token and totems as symbols of clans , mnemonic devices to keep memory of things , pictographic / ideograph\_narratives" (cited in Millrood, 2001, p.133) . In effect, visual graphics are a strong proof that written language started to exist long time ago.

In fact, our concern here is the English language writing system, which has changed remarkably over the centuries. In reality, the major changes occurred exactly in the fifteenth century because of the invention of printing at that time. There is a big difference in terms of spelling and even in the formation of some letters compared to present-day English. Although writing started a very long time ago, it has stayed an activity which is exercised only by a minority of people and this is due to many reasons. All human beings grow up speaking their first language because they acquire it naturally as children.

However, writing is different from speaking because it is not acquired. This ability needs to be learned consciously by individuals in a formal classroom context. The desire to be able to read and write

(literacy) was not overspread two hundred years ago, and only rulers of church and state mastered this skill. But at the present day reading and writing have become a desirable skill for the majority of the population. Two hundred years ago, literacy was not thought to be necessary for the working population, but because of industrialization, societies grew larger, and there was a need for workers who were able to read and write. Hence, individuals and societies saw the importance of education (including numeracy – as well as literacy) to realize their fulfillment and advancement. Now, literacy is a fundamental right; however, there are still many people who are deprived of that right.

Hence, in the context of education, writing is a vital skill for students. It is this skill in particular, which is used in exams to test students' knowledge in their L1 or for everyone using his first language; therefore, it is very important to train students diligently and attentively in the writing skill.

#### **4. L1writing vs. L2writing**

Krashen (1984) claimed that “studies of second language writing are sadly lacking” (cited in Barbara kroll, 1990, p.37). In fact, not very long ago, very few studies were conducted in the context of L2 writing. But thereafter research has become the concern of many L2 acquisition theorists. This part will try to provide a general view of L2 writing process and its relationship to L1 research.

#### **4.1. The relevance of L1 writing research to L2 writing research**

Earlier research in writing has proven that L2 writers make more use of their L1 while writing in L2 in spite of the fact that the degree to which they do so varies. Beare (2000) has carried out a research in writing where he asserts that adult writers use their L1 when writing in L2 to achieve specific aims such as planning, generating ideas or content, or for the sake of solving certain linguistic issues like vocabulary problems.

#### **4.2. L1 and L2 Differences**

Silva (1993) carried out a research study with a group of writers from different backgrounds to examine L1 and L2 writing differences. There were at least 27 different L1 represented in this empirical research. The writers were undergraduate college students in the US and had advanced level in the English language and possessed good writing ability. The results obtained showed that students who

were asked to perform written texts in L1 and L2 passed more time and effort in generating material in L2 than in L1, and it was much more difficult for them to make content generation in L2 and not very successfully .

#### **4.3. L1 and L2 Similarities**

Berman (1994) conducted an empirical research in a secondary school in Iceland with 126 EFL students. She found that many learners use their L1 writing skill in developing L2 written passages and they proved successful. According to Berman this great success is due to the learners ' proficiency in L2 grammar.

Matsumoto (1995) investigation carried out in Japan reveals that skilled EFL writers use similar writing strategies to those used by native English writers. He made an interview with 4 Japanese university professors about their writing strategies when writing their research papers and articles in English as a foreign language. The professors started learning English at the age of thirteen and held degrees from American universities in humanities and wrote university articles both in Japanese and English .The findings proved that these writers followed the same processes and strategies in L1 and L2 writing .

#### **5. The writing ability**

Writing is a mode of communication that employs sets of symbols to form words and sentences that stand for the sounds of speech, and obviously, there are rules and convention which govern these symbols and words in order to enable individuals to express their thoughts. According to Harmer (2004) “Both writing and speaking have their own signs, symbols and devices to make communication more effective” (P.10). In effect, writing is a special ability which allows the individuals to transform their thoughts into words in order to communicate their feelings in an effective way and a meaningful form.

#### **6. The nature of the writing ability**

The ability to write in L2 is becoming primordial in our global community, and this is mainly due to educational, business and personal reasons. Therefore, instruction in writing is gaining an increasing role and teaching languages has become oriented more and more for communicative reasons and settings.

According to Weigle (2002) the nature of the writing ability can be explained from different perspectives. Firstly, writing can be compared with the other productive skills like speaking and reading. Secondly, it can be studied as a social and cultural phenomenon and lastly writing can be defined as a cognitive activity.

### **6.1. The interrelation of writing and speaking**

Studies have addressed the differences between writing and speaking from various perspectives. Grabe and Kaplan (1996, as cited in Weigle, 2002) have pointed out contradictory positions from the part of many linguists when it comes to historical primacy of writing and speaking. Linguistic inquiry has advanced that speech is primary and written language is only a reflection of spoken language. However, educational research gives writing primacy in terms of correctness over oral language. This traditional view has been neglected recently because it advocates that neither oral nor written language is superior to the other.

### **6.2. Interrelation of reading and writing**

There is strong evidence that a close relationship exists between reading and writing. Krashen (1984) advocates that the development of the writing ability derives from large amounts of self-motivated reading for interest or pleasure. Krashen says, "It is reading that gives the writer the 'feel' for the look and texture of reader based prose" (cited in Kroll, 1990, p.88). Storsky (1983) analysed some L1 reading-writing correlation studies and he advanced the following:

- 1) – There exists close correlation between reading achievement and writing capacity. Thus, better writers are promising readers.
- 2) – There are correlations between reading experience and writing level, so good writers read more than poor writers .
- 3) – Correlations exist between reading ability and sophisticated syntactic complex writing. Good readers construct writing which is characterised by syntactically mature writing.



### **6.3. Writing a socio- cultural phenomenon**

Writing has two important aspects: social and cultural

#### **6.3.1. Social Aspects of writing**

Writing is more than a physical act done by an individual writer involving a cognitive effort. In fact writing is not an individual product, but it is rather a social and a cultural act (Weigle 2002). Hamp, Lyons and Kroll (1997) stated this same idea when they described writing as “an act that takes place within a context, that accomplishes a particular purpose, and that it is shaped for its intended audience” (cited in Weigle, p.19). Sperling (1996) advocates the same attitude when he notes that “writing is a meaning making activity that is socially and culturally shaped and individually and socially purposeful” (p.55). In similar vein Hayes (1996) states, “Writing is also social because it is a social art craft and carried out in a social setting. What we write and who we write to is shaped by social conventions by our history of social interaction” (cited in Weigle, p.19). In effect, writing occurs in a social context to accomplish a specific aim, and for this reason it should follow certain rules and social conventions.

#### **6.3.2 Cultural aspects of writing**

The cultural aspect of writing have been explained by Kaplan (1966) who tried to analyse and describe a big number of ESL essays, throughout his research study Kaplan tried to point important differences in the written discourse of students coming from different cultures. This idea of contrastive rhetoric was criticised at the beginning, but later it gained much respect. Grabe (1989), Kaplan (1996), and Leki (1992), stated some of the cultural impact on writing: They explained that the variations in writing do not reflect differences in thought pattern but rather differences in cultural preferences.

Among the cultural variations that can be related to cultural differences, we have the Arabic prose, which is characterized by parallelism and much co-ordination in contrast to English in which writers prefer subordination and hierarchical organization. Another example is Spanish writing style, where writers prefer long introduction and focusing slightly on the main topic of an essay by digression and asides. In Chinese, however, writers tend to over generalize by giving many examples but without saying the main

point of these examples, in opposition to the English style which is known for its transparency and explicitness. In effect, these cultural preferences can influence the coherence of a written texts and their organization as a whole, and hence writers can bring their own cultural background into their L2 writing which might result in odd written productions.

#### **6.4 Writing as a cognitive activity**

There are two types of writers: good writers, who plan, revise and reframe their work if necessary many times and the novice writers who do not edit their work neither for content nor for organization. In an attempt to make and mark the difference between good and novice writers, many researchers such as John R. Hayes and Linda Flowers (1980) tried to suggest models of cognitive writing processes. Such models help to answer questions such as: what are the cognitive/mental processes which are involved in writing? What sources of knowledge do writers use when they write? And what other factors besides the cognitive factor influence the writing process?

The models of writing processes that are suggested by researchers help to define clearly the writing skill and the different processes involved besides possible differences that may exist among skilled and unskilled writers. They can also shed light on some external factors that may influence writing. Among these models, for example, there is one which was designed by Hayes and Flowers (1980). It describes the process of writing in terms of the task environment which included many components: the writing assignment, the text produced, the writer's long term memory, and a number of cognitive processes. The Hayes and Flower tries to illustrate various issues in writing, and attempts to focus on different factors that affect the writing process, especially those related to internal influences. Other models were suggested by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) in which they outlined the difference between two types of writing: the first one involves what is named Knowledge Telling, which needs very little planning or revision. The second type of writing involves what is called Knowledge Transforming, which demands from the individual much more effort, skill and practice (cited in Weigle, 2002). Indeed,

in this type of writing, the individual uses existing knowledge to create new knowledge.

### **Conclusion**

It has been noticed that writing was the only support for learning grammar and vocabulary rather than a skill on its own right for a long time. Teachers methodologists and course designers have recently started to teach this skill with new ways which acknowledge its importance and emphasize its value. They have started by looking for the process that a good speaker of English follows when he decides to construct a piece of writing and observing how teachers' understanding of the process has implications for the ways they should approach teaching writing.

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