



Computer-based reading and writing across the curriculum: Two case studies of L2 writers

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Abstract

Since the early 1980s, second language (L2) writing specialists have been examining possible roles for computers in L2 writing instruction. How, and to what extent, L2 students use computer for academic literacy purposes beyond the writing classroom, that is, across the curriculum, has not received much attention. Because a common goal of L2 college level writing courses is to prepare students to write in these other domains, an awareness of computer-based literacy activities in non-L2 writing courses is essential to the cause of helping L2 writing instructors connect what students learn in their courses to how they write (and read) in other courses. This paper describes research aimed at contributing to such awareness: a qualitative study of the computer-based reading and writing activity of two undergraduate English as a Second Language (ESL) students beyond ESL writing courses.

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1. Introduction

Second language (L2) writing scholarship has produced many important insights that have changed the landscape of L2 writing instruction since it began to establish its own research and teaching agendas and to construct its own academic identity in the early 1980s. And yet, L2 compositionists are still confronted with perhaps the most fundamental question of all: What should they teach? This question overlaps, inevitably, with another one still not answered definitively: What should be seen as the primary purpose(s) of the L2, or English as a Second Language (ESL), writing course? Equipped with what **Tony Silva (1990)** has called “a merry-go-round of approaches” (p. 18) to choose from, ESL writing courses range across a wide array of options, from a general skills pedagogy emphasizing a core set of academic literacy skills (for example, writing topic sentences and thesis statements), to a “discourse communities” orientation that attempts to link what students learn in their ESL courses to

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what they will need to know to succeed in specific disciplinary communities, to a more critical literacy approach aimed at empowering students as individuals as well as writers by linking writing to social and other forms of justice and to personal growth.

Complicating the thorny job of selecting an appropriate writing philosophy and pedagogy is the ongoing shift from a traditional emphasis on print texts and print-based writing assignments to computer-based, onscreen texts and tasks. It is increasingly the case that students no longer rely on conventional print texts as their sources for academic writing and reading; the advent of the Internet and the personal computer has made the use of electronic text sources far more appealing, if not necessary, for many students, and it appears to be common nowadays for many university courses to require the use of such sources. How to account for this changing textual world and the need for new ways of conceptualizing reading and writing within the framework of electronic literacy is another of the major challenges confronting L2 writing specialists.

Meanwhile, international students do not enroll in ESL writing courses only. They naturally take other courses in which writing (and reading) plays a role to one degree or another. Given that (a) the ESL writing course is not an island or domain unto itself, (b) that ESL students probably hope (or expect) that in their ESL writing courses they will be shown how to write and read well in other courses, and (c) that at least some of students' writing is computer-based, we come again to the crucial question: What should be taught in the ESL writing classroom?

One way to answer that question is to learn more about the kinds of writing (and related reading) tasks students encounter in the wider disciplinary realm of the college or university at large, particularly as these tasks pertain to activity in the increasingly electronic textual world college courses operate in. Although a number of attempts have been made to learn about academic reading and writing tasks across the college curriculum, relatively few studies have focused on computer-based writing and reading activities. This paper describes a qualitative study that attempted to address that gap. It examined two ESL students with respect to their computer-based writing and reading in their (non-ESL writing) courses during one school term at a large research university in the United States. The purpose of the study was to learn about (a) how much computer-based writing and reading the students performed in courses across the curriculum and (b) what kinds of computer-based writing and reading tasks they engaged most frequently to address the question motivating the study: What should be taught in ESL writing courses with respect to computer-based writing? A closely related question addressed by the study was: To what extent should faculty outside ESL writing courses be responsible for teaching students how to use the computer to perform literacy tasks assigned in their courses? It should be noted that the study sought to learn about reading tasks as well as writing tasks because of the close connections between the two in academic settings. That is, writing tasks are usually related in one way or another to acts of reading, with reading providing valuable input for writing assignments (Belcher & Hirvela, 2001; Carson & Leki, 1993; Hirvela, 2004).

Answers to questions such as these are necessary if L2 writing courses are to better prepare students to write and read in other disciplinary domains and “across the topical landscape” (McGinley & Tierney, 1989), as many L2 writing specialists believe such courses should. These answers can also contribute to discussions of the writing across the curriculum (WAC) movement as it relates to ESL writing instruction and the all-important task of meeting the needs of students for whom English is not the native language.

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