



Second language writing as sociocognitive alignment

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Abstract

Second language writing (SLW) researchers have yet to examine writing as a *sociocognitive* process—one in which mind, body, and ecosocial world function integratively/ecologically rather than as separate phenomena. This study is a first attempt to do so. It proceeds by: (1) introducing the idea of a sociocognitive approach to language use, including SLW; (2) reviewing previous studies of writing which have taken related approaches; (3) providing detailed empirical support for the sociocognitive approach via micro-level, multimodal discourse analysis of a collaborative SLW event; and (4) discussing implications of this research for the SLW field.

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Introduction

The writer sits alone at her laptop. Following a cognitive plan, she activates cognitive knowledge, formulates text, and applies cognitive revising strategies (Flower & Hayes, 2009; Manchón, Murphy, & Roca de Larios, 2007; Torrance, van Waes, & Galbraith, 2007). Highly influential across the years in second language writing studies (SLW), this view is reactivated, in a sense, each time we employ process approaches in the classroom.

If the writer also happens to be a second language learner, written corrective feedback provided by teacher, tutor, or peer may promote additional, form-focused cognitive processing. Such processing may lead to either restructuring of specific mental-linguistic representations (Bitchener, 2012; Polio, 2012) or development of metacognitive revising strategies (Ferris, 2010).

By these accounts, writing is predominantly a cognitive activity: we take in information, process it, and output text/data on the model of a computer. External sources, forms, artifacts, and people may promote and even “mediate” such cognition, but cognition is where the action is, and learning to write largely means developing new cognitive strategies and/or new cognitive representations.

Cognition is obviously central to writing and its development. Yet versions of cognition assumed by cognitivist approaches tend to be “lonely” ones—to treat cognition as a brain-bound, internal affair (Atkinson, 2011b). In fact,

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however, writing takes place in a rich ecology of mind, body, and sociomaterial world, with each contributing crucially to its outcome. Published sources, for instance, often *initiate* writers' cognition rather than simply mediating it. Similarly, social conventions like SV(O) word order and Introduction–Methods–Results–Discussion research article format massively *organize* writers' cognition, providing fundamental “tools for thought” (Atkinson, 1990, 2002; Shaffer & Clinton, 2006). Or, consider revision from a less “lonely cognitive” perspective: pen, paper, sticky notes, dictionaries, published and unpublished sources, the Internet, laptop, and talk function seamlessly with internal cognition to produce an external written form, which then provides a stable base on which (sociocognitive) revision can take place and further texts be produced. The writer's computer skills, physical and mental condition, the atmosphere in the room, coziness of the chair, who and what else are in the room, and time and weather also contribute directly or indirectly to writing. As Clark (2001) put it: “There is thus a real sense. . . in which the notion of the “problem-solving engine” is really the notion of the *whole caboodle*. . . : the brain and body operating within an environmental setting” (p. 142). Or, in Shore's (1996) words, cognition-in-the-world operates not just “inside-out,” but “outside-in.”

The scenario just described can safely be assumed to extend to SLW. Yet no studies we know of have examined how mind, body, and world work together in SLW contexts. Here, we try to bridge the gap by studying how two advanced SL writers collaboratively co-constructed a journal article together and in concert with their non-human (but highly human-designed) environment. We begin by introducing our conceptual framework – a sociocognitive approach to interaction – focusing especially on the key concept of alignment. We then analyze two extended videotaped examples of alignment across our participants and their ecosocial worlds as they write collaboratively. Finally, we situate our findings in relation to issues in the SLW field and conclude.

Conceptual framework: A sociocognitive perspective on language use

The sociocognitive approach adopted here was initially developed as an “alternative approach” to studying second language acquisition (e.g., Atkinson, 2002, 2011a; Batstone, 2010). Mainstream approaches to SLA are highly cognitivist in that: (1) following Chomsky's (1965) *competence versus performance* distinction, they view cognition as in opposition to worldly action (e.g., Long & Doughty, 2003); and (2) following classic cognitive science, they treat the brain as a disembodied computational information processor (Boden, 2006). Contemporary cognitive scientists, however, have repeatedly demonstrated that the main function of animal nervous systems is to connect their possessors intimately to their worldly environments (see Atkinson, 2010 for partial review). Human cognition is therefore fundamentally – to use Lemke's (1995) term – *ecosocial*.

Although the sociocognitive approach was originally developed to study SLA, learning and use are potentially coextensive in this framework: virtually all instances of language use present potential learning opportunities, because learning a language means learning its interactional tools. Here we apply the sociocognitive perspective directly to language use—specifically, the production of academic writing.

Three basic principles underlie the sociocognitive approach (Atkinson, 2010). The first or *inseparability principle* holds that mind, body, and ecosocial world function integratively and inseparably in producing social (or sociocognitive) action, including writing. This claim is supported by a substantial cognitive science literature on environmentally embedded, situated, extended, distributed, and embodied cognition (see Atkinson, 2010 for partial review). In Lemke's (1997) words, “Our cognition is always bound up with, codependent with the participation and activity of Others. . . tools, symbols, processes, or things” (p. 38). In producing language, for instance, our cognition is deeply integrated with the sociomaterial environment, including our bodies, other human beings, non-linguistic semiotic systems (e.g., gestures, numbers), and “cognitive technologies” (Clark, 2001) like written sources, literacy, computers, and the Internet.

The second principle of a sociocognitive approach is the *adaptivity principle*. If language is primarily for social action, and social action requires the highly skilled coordination of individuals with each other and their nonhuman environments, then ecosocial adaptivity is central to language use. Our speech styles, for instance, vary adaptively according to who we are talking to, the conventional formality of the situation, the physical setting and its affordances, the topic, and the interlocutors' background knowledge, emotional states, and linguistic competence.

The third and most important principle of a sociocognitive approach, the *alignment principle*, concerns the moment-by-moment processes by which ecosocial elements are produced and coordinated. Atkinson, Churchill, Nishino, and Okada (2007) defined alignment as “the complex means by which human beings effect coordinated

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