

Shared features of L2 writing: Intergroup homogeneity and text classification

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Abstract

This study investigates intergroup homogeneity within high intermediate and advanced L2 writers of English from Czech, Finnish, German, and Spanish first language backgrounds. A variety of linguistic features related to lexical sophistication, syntactic complexity, and cohesion were used to compare texts written by L1 speakers of English to L2 writers of English in order to examine if L2 writing shares text similarities regardless of the L1 of the writer. The results of the study provide evidence for intergroup homogeneity in the linguistic patterns of L2 writers in that four word-based indices (hypernymy, polysemy, lexical diversity, and stem overlap) demonstrated similar patterns of occurrence in the L2 writer populations sampled. However, significant differences were reported for these indices between L1 and L2 writers. The results of this study provide evidence that some aspects of L2 writing may not be cultural or independent, but rather based on the amount and type of linguistic knowledge available to L2 learners as a result of language experience and learner proficiency level.

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Keywords: Computational linguistics; Corpus linguistics; L2 writing; Working memory; Second language writing; Intergroup homogeneity

Introduction

A key research strand in studies of second language (L2) writing has been the influence of the writer's first language (L1) (Kubota, 1998; Matsuda, 1997). Numerous studies have described the ways in which L2 writers' L1 can influence their L2 written production (i.e., intergroup heterogeneity) (Connor, 1984; Jarvis, 2010; Johns, 1984; Reid, 1992; Scarcella, 1984; Ventola & Mauranten, 1991). These studies have generally supported the notion that transfer from the L1 to the L2 occurs in the recursive strategies the writers use (i.e., planning and brainstorming), the rhetorical structure of the text, and the linguistic features produced (i.e., the lexicon, syntactic constructions, and the use of cohesive devices) (Grabe & Kaplan, 1996). Fewer studies have investigated similarities among L2 writers regardless of language background (i.e., intergroup homogeneity) and the potential for such similarities to characterize L2 writing (e.g. Hinkel, 2002; Reid, 1992).

Like these previous studies (Hinkel, 2002; Reid, 1992), we are interested in examining the presence of linguistic features in essays produced by L2 writers in English that are shared among the writers regardless of their L1. However,

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unlike Hinkel (2002), we directly investigate intergroup homogeneity within L2 writers of English and, unlike Reid (1992), we focus on a variety of linguistic factors, such as lexical sophistication, syntactic complexity, and cohesive devices, all of which are important indicators of writing knowledge and common areas of interest for studies concerning working memory processes (Kellogg, 1996; McCutchen, 1996, 2000; Schoonen, Snellings, Stevenson, & van Gelderen, 2009).

Our primary research goal is to investigate the notion that L2 writers produce texts that share similar linguistic features regardless of the L2 writer's L1. In particular, we are interested in examining college level L2 writers' use of linguistic factors as a shared intergroup construct. We use texts written by native speakers of English as baseline examples of English college level writing and compare the production of lexical, syntactic, and cohesive features in the native speaker samples to those of the L2 writers of English. Such an approach permits us to examine if L2 writers produce texts that differ predictably from a baseline population, as well as to analyze patterns in L2 writing as generalizable occurrences that are shared across a range of L2 writers. Such an approach is important because it affords an examination of linguistic features inclusive to L2 writers as a composite. If we can predict general linguistic features that characterize L2 writers, then we can better understand the unique nature of L2 writing (Cumming, 2001; Hedgcock, 2005). In addition, such an approach can provide evidence that some aspects of L2 writing may not be cultural or independent, but rather based on the amount and type of linguistic knowledge available to L2 learners as a result of language experience and learner level (i.e., related to work memory processing).

Second language writing processes

When exploring differences between L1 and L2 writing, researchers generally make a distinction between higher-order operations and lower-order operations. Higher order operations such as planning, brainstorming, and text evaluation play an important role in developing ideas and revising writing. Such factors link strongly to a writer's L1 and thus contribute to explaining writing proficiency as a function of cross-linguistic influences (Cumming, 1990). Lower-order factors, on the other hand, are generally linguistic in nature and help L2 writers "transform the propositional content of the message into language" (Schoonen et al., 2009, p. 79) as well as structure their ideas into a pre-developed plan and later modify the ideas and the essay structure during the revision process. The process of selecting the appropriate words, structuring those words syntactically, and then ensuring that the words and the structure are cohesive is a major struggle for many L2 writers (Bell & Burnaby, 1984; Bialystok, 1978; Brown & Yule, 1983; Nunan, 1989; Schoonen et al., 2009; White, 1981) and one that is influenced by their first language (Jones & Tetroe, 1987).

Lower-order factors also affect the working memory resources of L2 writers (Kellogg, 1996; McCutchen, 1996, 2000; Schoonen et al., 2009) because the complexity of writing requires conscious attention to word choice, syntax, text connections, and text organization, all of which can overload the working memory of the writer, especially in reference to processing and storing linguistic items (McCutchen, 1996; Scardamalia, 1981). Many L1 writers have automatized the aspects of lower level writing skills such as the lexical and syntactic production needed for text generation. Thus, for these writers, writing can occur with little conscious attention to short-term working memory processes (McCutchen, 2000) and resources can instead be devoted to higher-level demands such as text organization (Ransdell and Levy, 1996). However, L2 writers are less likely to effectively manage the complexities of writing because they may not have automated lexical and syntactic resources and therefore must devote conscious attention to word and syntactic choices (Schoonen et al., 2009). This is especially true in reference to lexical retrieval, which demands much more attention in an L2 than in an L1 (Chenoweth & Hayes, 2001). Committing attention to lower level writing skills influences the ability of some L2 learners to attend to higher-level strategies such as metacognitive knowledge and tapping into past writing experiences (Schoonen et al., 2009; Weigle, 2005), which, in turn, can affect the quality of writing produced (Schoonen et al., 2009).

Thus, in order to be successful, L2 writers need to have quick access to a large number of L2 words, phrases, and syntactic structures, along with the knowledge of how to combine these linguistic elements into a coherent piece. When such access is unavailable because of differences in language proficiency between the L1 and the L2, writers are left with a limited number of choices. These include relying on their L1 to help fill in missing linguistic information or relying on their existing L2 linguistic knowledge. The former tactic seems common, with many studies reporting links between lower level factors and the writer's LI (Connor, 1984; McClure, 1991; Reid, 1992). However, some lower level factors also show strong tendencies to be generalizable across L2 writing in English regardless of the L1 of the writer. Thus, similarities in lower level factors may exist across L2 writers as a population (Hinkel, 2002; Reid, 1992).

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