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Understanding writing strategy use from a sociocultural perspective: The case of skilled and less skilled writers



Xiao Lei

School of Foreign Languages, South China University of Technology, 381 Wushan Road, Tianhe District, Guangzhou, Guangdong 510641, China

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 March 2016

Received in revised form 6 June 2016

Accepted 16 June 2016

Available online 25 June 2016

Keywords:

Activity theory

Writing strategies

Internalisation

Imitation

ABSTRACT

Research on writers' strategy use has proliferated over the past four decades. However, few studies have specifically compared skilled and less skilled student writers' strategic use of mediating resources in spite of the recent popularity of including sociocultural perspectives in L2 writing research. Drawing on the activity theory and the concept of internalisation, this study examines four skilled and four less skilled student writers' mediation strategy use. Data were collected from multiple sources, including interviews, process logs, stimulated recalls and students' essays. Data analysis revealed that although the two groups of students tend to use similar types of resources, internalisation of them differs significantly. Differences are mainly found in three sub-processes of internalisation, namely, noticing, imitating and goal setting. The identified importance of these sub-processes to internalisation suggests that language learners should raise their language awareness, make persistent imitations and integrate learning-to-write with writing-to-learn for more effective strategy use.

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1. Introduction

An increasing number of studies have explored language learners' writing strategy use in tandem with the process approach in L2 writing over the past four decades (Bai, 2015; Boshier, 1998; De Silva & Graham, 2015; Flower & Hayes, 1981; Manchón & Roca de Larios, 2007; Wong, 2005). Many of them usually refer to strategies as inner mental operations such as planning, reviewing, monitoring, generating ideas, and revising (Bai, 2015; De Silva & Graham, 2015) and have focused on the differences between strategies used by skilled and less skilled writers. Some researchers argue that skilled writers use better strategies and use strategies more frequently than less skilled writers (Bai, Hu, & Gu, 2014; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Sasaki, 2000) while some others suggest that writers often use similar strategies but it is how they execute and orchestrate strategies really counts (Manchón & Roca de Larios, 2007; Roca de Larios, Murphy, & Manchón, 1999).

Recent studies have increasingly problematised the cognitive paradigm prevalent in writing research as it has been found to be narrow and isolates cognition from context (Atkinson, 2003; Lei, 2008; Nishino & Atkinson, 2015). These studies contend that human cognition is never a completely inside-of-the-head process and the so-called cognitive functions are always distributed in the medium culture, in the social world, and in time (Atkinson, 2010; Engeström, 2008; Nishino & Atkinson, 2015; Roth & Jornet, 2013). Therefore, there have been calls for a paradigm shift in L2 writing since "the time seems ripe for questioning and rethinking the field's understanding of cognition" (Nishino & Atkinson, 2015, p. 52).

E-mail addresses: michellelei@126.com, flxlei@scut.edu.cn.

Among the emerging paradigms for studying cognition in general and strategies in particular, the sociocultural perspective has been prominent because of the insights it provides into the social, cultural and historical roots of human cognition and the crucial role that social relationships and culturally constructed artefacts play in the development of cognition (Gao, 2010; Lantolf, 2006; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Oxford et al., 2014). Sociocultural studies of L2 writing (Fujioka, 2014; Lee, 2014; Mak & Lee, 2014; Prior, 2006; Russell, 1997; Villamil & de Guerrero, 1996; Worden, 2015) have proliferated in recent years and a number of them (Lei, 2008; Kang & Pyun, 2013; Yang, 2014; Yu & Lee, 2016) have investigated writers' strategic use of mediating resources. However, little research has specifically compared skilled and less skilled L2 writers' strategy use from the sociocultural perspective and this study aims to fill this research gap.

2. Strategy research comparing skilled and less skilled student writers in L2 contexts

A growing body of writing strategy research has been conducted on L2 writers (Bai, 2015; Bai et al., 2014; De Silva, 2010; De Silva & Graham, 2015; Manchón, 2001; Manchón & Roca de Larios, 2007). Researchers have explored how understanding of a strategy and its effectiveness of skilled L2 writers differs from their less skilled counterparts (Bai et al., 2014; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Manchón & Roca de Larios, 2007; Roca de Larios et al., 1999; Sasaki, 2000). Some researchers argue that skilled L2 writers use better strategies and use strategies more frequently than less skilled L2 writers and these differences contribute significantly to their writing performance (Bai et al., 2014; Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987; Sasaki, 2000). For example, Sasaki (2000) studied the strategy use by Japanese EFL experts and novice writers and found that experts frequently use rhetorical refining in their writing while translating and local planning are strategies favoured by novices. Bai et al.'s (2014) quantitative study of Singaporean pupils' writing strategy use showed that the top students use significantly more of planning, monitoring, evaluating, text-generating and revising strategies than both the middle and bottom groups.

Some other researchers argue that “there are no good or bad strategies” but it is how the strategies are executed that counts (Anderson, 2005, p. 762). Manchón and Roca de Larios (2007) studied planning strategy and showed that skilled L2 writers tend to devote “more time to constructing their pragmatic, textual and ideational representations before putting pen to paper” than less skilled writers and they were also more capable of activating and incorporating them into the text (p. 579). Roca de Larios et al. (1999) examined the use of restructuring strategies and found that both intermediate and advanced writers use restructuring strategies, but for different purposes. Intermediate writers restructure for compensatory purposes significantly more than advanced writers whose main goals are of an ideational and textual nature.

These studies have generally shown that skilled L2 writers use writing strategies differently from their less skilled peers and probably more effectively than them; yet, the strategies involved are largely “mental activity” (Macaro, 2006, p. 328). In light of the social trend in L2 writing research (Nishino & Atkinson, 2015), it seems necessary to concomitantly expand the scope of writing strategy research and explore writers' mediation strategies from a sociocultural perspective. In addition, research on skilled and less skilled writers' use of mediating resources can enrich our knowledge about the complexity of cognition and the effectiveness of strategy use.

3. Understanding writing strategy use from a sociocultural perspective

The sociocultural perspective adopted here views writing as a fundamentally social activity that is always mediated by and situated in the social context (Engeström, 1999; Prior, 2006). Using the activity theory (Engeström, 1999), a major theoretical framework in sociocultural studies, writing can be exemplified as in Fig. 1. Writing activity is mediated by an array of sociocultural artefacts that cross modes and media; it is also situated in a particular community, in which writers follow rules and take roles to participate. The short-lived actions of writing are embedded in a collective and relatively enduring activity, aiming to fulfill short-term and long-term goals (Prior, 2006). Contradictions pervade all elements of the system and these can constrain or develop writing activities (Engeström, 1999, 2001; Mak & Lee, 2014). The activity theory has been frequently used as a theoretical lens to study mediation strategies (Lei, 2008; Kang & Pyun, 2013; Yang, 2014; Yu & Lee, 2016). Through this lens, strategies can be seen as writers' socially mediated actions, which involve potential mediation by all the four types of mediating resources.

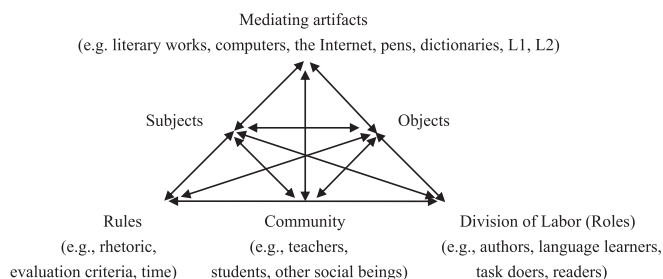


Fig. 1. Writing activity system (based on Engeström, 1999).

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