

A Potential Application of L2 Writing as an Affective Management Tool for L2 Learners

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Introduction

Among a variety of affective factors, language anxiety has often been regarded as one of the most pervasive phenomena in the contexts of second language learning (Oxford, 1999; MacIntyre & Gardner, 1989). Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) characterize it not as a general type of performance anxiety, such as communication apprehension or test anxiety, but rather as “a distinct complex of self-perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of the language learning process” (p. 128).

Although language anxiety is sometimes viewed as a helpful energizer for tackling such complex tasks as L2 learning, the potentially harmful effects of anxiety, which are often called “debilitating anxiety” (Brown, 1994), cannot be readily dismissed, especially in the context of L2 teaching. In fact, the issue of student anxiety and its potentially negative impact on L2 learning and performance pose a tremendous challenge to language teachers, as it can hamper optimal learning and teaching from taking place in the classroom (Young, 1991).

Indeed, previous research on language anxiety has offered a lot of insights into the nature of anxiety experienced by L2 learners in their learning processes, and some measures or techniques to help learners overcome their anxiety have also been offered from different disciplines (Crookall & Oxford, 1991; Campbell & Ortiz, 1991). However, those suggested ways of reducing language anxiety have not been proven to be effective in all different situations or settings where L2 learners might experience anxiety. Many of the relaxation techniques represented by Suggetopedia (See Foss & Reizel, 1988; Littlewood, 1984; Oxford, 1990) are reported at least to help teachers create a non-threatening and relaxing atmosphere in the foreign/second language classroom, but there

is no evidence that shows the actual reduction of anxiety on the part of each individual student in class. In fact, the primary concern of those anxiety-reduction techniques seems rather too much focused on how teachers can deal with student anxiety or what teachers should do as part of their responsibility. And most of the techniques do not necessarily take into account the voluntary efforts of students in dealing with their own emotional difficulties, underestimating the students' potential abilities to face their own anxiety and manage their own learning.

On the one hand, it is certainly true that there is no immediate solution or panacea to such a complex phenomenon as language anxiety, especially in light of the fact that its actual manifestations can vary from one student to another, reflecting each student's individual differences (Skehan, 1989). On the other hand, however, this clearly suggests that each student has his/her own way of dealing with anxiety in the ways that correspond to the uniqueness as an individual person.

This paper thus would like to propose the use of *writing* as a tool for facilitating affective self-management on the part of students. It should be noted, however, that this suggestion does not imply that the teachers are exempt from their responsibility for dealing with their students' anxiety, but rather that both teachers and students can share the responsibility so that both sides can benefit from each other in the attempts to manage language anxiety in a more collaborative manner. Potential applications of L2 writing, though not fully explored in many ESL/EFL teaching contexts, are certainly worth examining, not just for the practical relevance to the other skill areas (i.e., listening, speaking, and reading) but also for the potential utility as an affective managing tool.

In the sections that follow, potential benefits of L2 writing as an affective management tool will be explored by referring to several inherent characteristics of writing and the particular advantages that the other means of language cannot provide in exchange.

Benefits of Writing

An exploration of the act of writing and its benefits on the personal level can help us realize how wide-ranging the potential utility of writing can be, regardless of our different

levels of affinity toward writing.

Indeed, practical benefits of writing can be quite different from one person to another, depending upon our individual differences in the ways in which we approach various writing activities, but at the same time, there seems to be no doubt about the value of writing as a “universal all-purpose tool” in our lives (Smith, 1994, p.15). In this regard, the true value of writing lies in its innate qualities that permit multiple applications in response to our human needs and purposes. Although those human needs and purposes can be accomplished by other means of language or non-language, writing, as one of the best inventions of our human history, is an irreplaceable utility with benefits that no other alternative can offer in exchange. The following are some of the internal advantages that writing can provide with us in contrast to its oral counterpart, namely speaking.

1) *Writing is a tangible construction.*

According to Smith (1994), writing can provide an opportunity for the writer to examine his/her own ideas in an objective manner. He observes, “writers can look at the language they produce in a way that speakers cannot” (p.16). The tangible nature of writing, thus, enables us to see the connection between the writer and what is being written, which naturally involves a lot of negotiation of meaning through interaction between the two. Scholes and Willis (1991) argue that writing can allow language to be regarded as an object, or language data to be examined and discussed through the use of metalanguage.

2) *Writing can facilitate thought.*

In relation to the tangible nature of writing, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) argue, “writing can benefit thought by providing opportunities for the critical examination of one’s own ideas and for their revision” (as cited in Smith, 1994, p. 250). In other words, the relationship between thought and writing is not a unidirectional one, influenced by either way but rather quite an interdirectional or interactive relationship that facilitates the development of both. Theorists such as Goody (1977) or Olson (1977) strongly claim that writing has made it possible for us to think in an abstract and explicit manner, although the same kind of abstract thinking can also be accomplished in some forms of speech such as a lecture that is often highly elaborated or explicit, in comparison to the succinctness of

some forms of writing such as personal notes or memos. That is, the relationship between thought and writing seems quite interdependent on each other, bringing tremendous benefits to the growth and refinement of both entities. Smith (1994) concludes by alluding to such reciprocity of writing and thought, stating, “writing makes a particular kind of thought possible, but the potential of thought makes writing possible...and there is no doubt that writing can facilitate thought” (p. 242).

3) *You can manage your own writing.*

Although the act of writing is relatively slow compared with speaking and also thought itself, such physical disadvantage can actually turn out to be quite an advantage when we look at it from a slightly different perspective. Emig (1978) argues that the slowness of writing can benefit writers in many ways. For example, writers can reduce speed or even stop writing if they want to, so that they can stay back and think about what is being written. Since writing can provide a record of what writers have written, their fear of forgetting what they have already produced is immediately resolved when they look back on the already written texts. Butler (1972) offers a metaphorical description of writing by saying that “writing is like slow motion thinking with the possibility of replays” (as cited in Smith, 1994, p. 244). In other words, the slow rate of writing seems to reflect the time we need for focusing our attention or awareness of our mind. Smith (1994) describes this phenomenon by saying, “thought develops through time, but awareness has to stop time, to slice it into the cross sections of events that can be inspected and described” (p. 45).

Barthes (1968) similarly observes that the power of writing lies in its ability to delineate and sustain the world that we inhabit, which allows us to create new worlds that we can construct, modify, and demolish at will (Smith, p. 243).

4) *Self-revelation through writing.*

In contrast to speaking, writing does not always require any particular audience except the writer him/herself, unless the writing that we create is published either informally or formally and read by others. This personal nature of writing can not only provide a sense of security and comfort on the part of writers in freely exploring their ideas or thoughts during and even after writing, but also can contribute to facilitating self-

searching or self-analysis through the process of deconstruction and reconstruction. In such processes, our beliefs or assumptions can be challenged in a retrospective manner before they are reconstructed based on our self-discovery and analysis. In this respect, writing allows us to view the reality from a different perspective as it draws us into a search for a connection between our cognitive and intuitive understanding of the world (Schiller, 1999).

As Perez (1998) observes, we bring our own experiences into writing in order to construct meaning, and through this process we find ourselves in relation to our world. Although writing involves a lot of pain or sometimes agony in its processes as well as the pleasure of self-discovery and analysis, the benefits gained through the reconstructive process of writing can increase as the writing proceeds. In other words, writing can be viewed as “an extension and reflection of all our efforts to develop and express ourselves in the world around us, to make sense of that world, and to impose order upon it” (Smith, 1994, p. 17).

5) *A place for autonomous learning.*

Learning is often assumed to take place when our brain is activated either consciously or unconsciously. But our conscious efforts to activate our brain do not always lead to desired or expected learning outcomes in proportion to our invested time and energy. According to Atwell (1987), this un-learning is quite a natural consequence of our brain mechanism, in the sense that our brain does not learn unless it needs to. As a solution to this capricious nature of our brain, Swoger (1989) illustrates the potential benefits of writing for learning-disabled students by saying, “writing seems to be a catalyst, an ignition system to start up these learning machines” (p. 64).

Although other means of language can equally facilitate learning depending on the needs of our brain, writing seems to be more powerful and efficient as a tool to initiate the first step of learning. This advantage of writing in terms of its role as a learning facilitator can be ascribed to the following two inherent characteristics of writing, that is;

- a. Writing involves the process of interaction between the writer and what is written or being written;
- b. Writing requires our brain to focus its attention on every act of our writing, i.e.

word choice, spelling, organization etc.

Speaking, in contrast, usually does not allow an on-line interaction between the speaker and what is being spoken, except when the speech is monologic in nature. Since speaking, which usually involves two or more people, is designed to be situation-dependent and spontaneous in nature, the speaker cannot monitor and reflect on what is to be said or being said in the same way as in writing, let alone have the time for correction and modification of what has already been said. Furthermore, the deliberate nature of writing accompanied by the time availability naturally encourages us to be more attentive to various aspects of our intentions to be expressed, including some technicalities of writing, such as spelling, punctuation, and organization. In this respect, our brain can be called upon to work harder so that natural learning processes can be initiated accordingly.

External Benefits of Writing both in L1 and L2

As we have seen above, writing offers a variety of benefits to people who engage in its processes. In contrast to other means of language, those inherent advantages of writing can also be extended to the potential benefits that writers can gain externally as a by-product of various writing activities. With regard to writing in L2, the bi-literate competence can be highly valued academically and socially as a useful asset for many instrumental purposes (Reid, 1989; Leki, 1992).

For example, academic excellence in the U.S. colleges is often evaluated by the quality of term papers or written reports, as well as oral proficiency in class presentations or participation (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992). Thus, prospective ESL students who aspire to succeed in U.S. colleges or graduate schools can benefit a lot from learning to write in English. Even if the motivation of those ESL/EFL students is quite instrumental in orientation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972), the utility of L2 writing competence can easily compensate for the necessary efforts that they invest in learning to write in English.

Furthermore, many researchers have pointed out that there are tremendous effects of writing on the other language skills and vice versa (Mangelsdorf, 1989, Krashen, 1982, Carrell, Devine,&Eskey, 1988). In this respect, the development of L2 writing skills can lead to that of other aspects of language learning as it involves interaction between them.

Dealing with Language Anxiety through L2 Writing

As examined in the previous sections, most of the intrinsic characteristics of writing seem to offer potential benefits to ESL/EFL writers not only for their learning enhancement but also for their learning management. In order to make their learning proceed smoothly, L2 learners are reported to employ many kinds of strategies to manage their own learning. One type of strategy that learners typically employ for their emotional management is called an “affective strategy” (Oxford & Nyikos, 1989), which reflects the learners’ efforts to deal with different kinds of emotional/psychological problems that they encounter in the process of their L2 learning and performance. Language anxiety, which is also called foreign/second language anxiety, is one of the emotional problems that L2 learners often experience in various L2 activities that they perform both in and outside of the classroom. Writing, besides its existence as one of the four language skills, can also be used as one of the powerful affective strategies when learners tackle the enormity of language anxiety.

This section thus will propose a potential application of writing as an alternative way of dealing with language anxiety by emphasizing the responsibility of students rather than that of the teacher. With this general objective in mind, several potential benefits of writing are also discussed in terms of its utility as an affective self-managing strategy that students can employ in their own way. This will be done by referring to the internal/external characteristics of writing examined in the previous sections.

Benefits of Writing as an Affective Management Tool

- 1) One of the characteristics of writing is its tangible nature of what has been written. This advantage of writing, in contrast to that of speaking, seems to be quite beneficial to those ESL/EFL learners who are prone to feel anxious when faced with uncertainty of whether what they produce has been properly communicated to others, or vaguely fear that they might sound comic for their fragmented speech and pronunciation (Cohen & Norst, 1989; Price, 1991). Such types of anxiety, often called “*performance anxieties*” (Horwitz et al., 1986), have been identified in relation to many kinds of activities that learners are required to perform in L2, and they are often accompanied by fear of negative evaluation from others (Daly, 1991;

McCroskey, 1987). In this respect, utility of writing seems to provide a tremendous benefit for those L2 learners who are suffering from performance anxieties. According to Krashen (1981), the “affective filter” of those learners can be lowered through writing, to the extent that they can engage themselves into the language data without being afraid of others’ immediate evaluation. In relation to the other hypotheses that Krashen proposed, writing allows enough time for the learners to monitor what they have produced in reference to their own interlanguage rules as well as other sources of information such as dictionaries, grammar books, or their own notes for a check-up. Such analytical processes that writing can bring to L2 learners cannot usually be available in speaking, where there is no time to monitor what has been heard, let alone what they have just said. In other words, the tangible nature of writing can provide learners with good opportunities to look at what they have produced in an objective and analytical manner as well as a secure place for their autonomous learning.

- 2) The second attribute of writing, “writing can facilitate thought,” is quite relevant to the other characteristics of writing, in the sense that writing involves activation of our mind, and our mind accelerates its activation processes by juggling various thoughts or ideas in our own ways. Such processes of thought juggling by means of language can also have a lot of implications for anxiety-management that each learner may have to resort to, especially in times of emotional/psychological difficulties. For example, when we happen to be faced with some troubles in our lives, the first thing that we tend to think of is what kind of trouble we are facing, how severe it is, and then what has made us fall into that trouble and why, before we finally start searching for a possible solution. This procedure of problem-management/solving that we normally utilize in our daily lives actually quite corresponds to an affective management strategy that we may use in dealing with language anxiety, often as a corollary to the way in which our mind works as a self-defense mechanism (Eharman, 1996). The advantage of writing, in this respect, is that it can facilitate the process of problem-solving mechanisms that our mind has a natural predilection to employ (Vaillant, 1993). In other words, the procedure that we

follow by starting with problem identification, description, and then solution, can be available in a more explicit and detailed manner while writing. In addition, already written texts can provide another source of objective analysis that invites further reflections of our thoughts, or the opportunities for our self-reconstruction or change.

- 3) The third characteristic of writing is its relatively slow pace of activity, compared to other means of language. This seemingly disadvantageous trait of writing can turn out to be a tremendous advantage, especially for L2 writers who need more time to process available language data before they generate actual language products. As mentioned earlier, our attention freezes time for capturing a slice of events that can be converted into language. This process of converting our thoughts into language, especially in a spoken language, can be a potential source of anxiety in L2 learners, because the spontaneous nature of speaking constrains or sometimes exceeds the processing load that they can handle in a fleeting second (Eysenck, 1979; Tobias, 1986). As a result, their spoken language may end up being uncommunicated or miscommunicated, against their initial will or thought. In contrast to L2 speaking, however, writing in L2 can provide learners with enough time to process language that corresponds to their intended thoughts or ideas. Although writing requires a lot of energy and often patience for L2 learners, such mental/physical efforts that they invest in writing can be quite rewarding in the long run, in the sense that linguistic competence acquired through writing can be readily transferred to the development of other language skills, especially speaking (See Mangelsdorf, 1989). Thus, writing in L2 can provide an optimal language practice environment for L2 learners of every level, in the sense that they can improve and refine their language at their own pace (Fulwiler, 1987).
- 4) The fourth characteristic trait of writing is that writing is primarily a personal endeavor to look deep into one's self. This does not mean that we cannot understand and analyze ourselves unless we engage in writing, but rather that the act of writing and its processes can make our self-analysis more precise and detailed in description and see ourselves from a more objective viewpoint (Lucas, 1990). Indeed, writing about personal matters may invite further anxiety in the first place, because vividness

of description accompanied by the sometimes severe nature of a problem can be manifested in a more revealing manner. However, such a process of unfolding one's inner self through writing can often be rewarded by a sense of self-discovery and catharsis-like experience as writing proceeds. For example, it is not quite unlikely that nervous feelings or frustrations that characterize language anxiety can derive from the learner's unrealistic and sometimes erroneous beliefs about language learning. According to a survey of learner beliefs by Horwitz (1988), some learners 1) were concerned about the correctness of their speech in comparison to native-like accent or pronunciation, 2) believed that two years of language learning would be enough to achieve a native-like fluency, 3) expressed that language learning means learning how to translate, and 4) held the notion that success of L2 learning is limited to a few individuals who are gifted for language learning. Horwitz observes that when their beliefs and reality clash, anxiety naturally results. In dealing with such types of anxiety that derive from the learners' emotional conflicts within themselves, writing can serve as an optimal place for their self-reflection and analysis, in the sense that the irrational beliefs or assumptions that they have held for L2 learning can naturally be challenged and reconstructed, based on their critical awareness of the way they are as L2 learners. In other words, the heart of such self-reflection through writing lies not necessarily in the outcomes or solutions that they might find to their own problems, but rather in the very processes of finding more about themselves in terms of what difficulties they have had, why they feel they are being caught up in such emotional turmoil, and how they would like to deal with it. In their efforts to make things explicit verbally in their second language, they might also become more aware of their own problems (Foss & Reizel, 1988), along with a renewed understanding of self not only as a second language learner but also as a person.

Deletiner (1999) quotes from one of her students' portfolio essays: "...with my pen in hand, at times I felt that I was on the couch at the therapist's office" (p. 78). Of course, it is quite difficult or sometimes embarrassing to reveal oneself in writing, especially for those L2 learners who are not accustomed to writing personal matters for some cultural/social reasons (Leki, 1992), in personal journals or diaries, for

example, which are usually not supposed to be shared by anyone but the writer him/herself. However, this can be more suitable as a way of self-exploration than writing personal narratives as a classroom writing assignment. The therapeutic aspects of writing, which have originated in psychoanalysis as a way of counseling techniques for eliciting inner conflicts of patients suffering from mental illnesses (Leo, 1994, Murphy, 1998), still remain under debate as to whether they should be introduced into a writing classroom or not, but the utility of writing as a tool for self-discovery or self-analysis seems to naturally entail the therapeutic effects on the writers as well (Bishop, 1993). In other words, such intrinsic benefits of writing are so embedded in the nature of writing activities that they cannot be easily separated.

- 5) The last and foremost important characteristic of writing is that writing can be a place for autonomous learning. One of the implications of this nature of writing for anxiety-management might be a need for shared responsibility of both teachers and students in dealing with language anxiety. As is apparent from many anxiety-reduction techniques that have been proposed by researchers and teachers alike, the teacher's responsibility for managing their students' anxiety has been more emphasized than the encouragement of the students' self management of their own anxiety. Although it is undoubtedly true that the teacher's supportive interventions and efforts to alleviate the students' anxiety can be quite helpful and should be encouraged as much as possible, the heavy reliance of the students on the teacher in dealing with their individually different affective needs or difficulties seems to be rather counter-effective for their further development and growth as self-directed L2 learners. With this respect, the potential benefits of writing as a facilitator of autonomous learning can also be considered quite relevant to fostering the students' self-responsible attitudes toward their own learning processes (Burton & Carroll, 2001). For example, those students whose anxiety comes from vague feelings of uncertainty about their L2 learning might also benefit from various L2 writing activities (e.g., learning logs, dialogue journals, personal diaries), where they can freely describe and explore their concerns or difficulties associated with the processes of their L2 learning and performance (Mlynarczyk, 1998; Peyton &

Staton, 1996). Such exploratory attempts to reflect on their own learning processes can naturally provide further chances of their self-awareness, which also help them identify and reframe some of their own problems as future learning tasks (Foehr, 2000). Even though they may not be able to find an immediate solution to the problems, conscious awareness of their own difficulties seems to be a crucial step for promoting their self-directed and autonomous learning, especially to manage the affective sides of their L2 learning. In this sense, the learners' self-reflective analysis of their own problems through writing can help them find a way of managing or even living with some of the vague fear that is frequently encountered in the process of L2 learning and performance.

Language anxiety, its nature, manifestations, and sources are quite different from one learner to another, reflecting the learners' individual differences in their cultural backgrounds, experiences, levels of proficiency, and personalities (Young, 1991). In this sense, writing and its essentially personal nature seem to be quite compatible with the multidimensional and idiosyncratic nature of language anxiety. Thus, when used upon the students' own initiative, writing can offer an enormous benefit for both students and teachers, as it accommodates the students' individual differences in the ways in which they may experience, approach, and deal with the complex phenomenon of language anxiety.

Conclusion/ Suggestions

This paper has attempted to examine the potential utility of writing as an affective management tool for L2 learners, by focusing on the benefits of L2 writing in dealing with the issue of language anxiety.

Reflecting the complex and multidimensional nature of language anxiety, several recent techniques for anxiety reduction have placed more emphasis on the importance of the student's self-awareness in dealing with their anxiety, but such techniques as self-talk or imaginary self-dialogue (See Crookall & Oxford, 1991; Young, 1991) do not always guarantee the actual engagement by the students especially when they are already in anxiety-provoking situations. If employed in conjunction with some personal writing

activities, however, their potential utility can be multiplied, because writings accompanied by self-talk exercises seem to naturally foster the students' own responsibility or initiative to tackle their own emotional difficulties.

The idea of incorporating writing activities into the collection of anxiety-reduction techniques that already exist as a teacher resource (See Young, 1991) seems to be quite in line with the recommendation offered by Foss and Reizel (1988), who suggest that the teacher encourage their students to verbalize any fears or nervous feelings and write them down in a self-reflective journal or diary entry (Kramsch & Lam, 1999). As a powerful device for promoting our self-reflective potential, writing can also be incorporated in many of the language learning activities beyond the context of the classroom. A variety of writing tasks, such as journal writing, self-reflective diary keeping, or dialogue journals, can help students be more engaged in self-reflection, as they work on the emotional aspects of their own learning (Young, 1991; Schiller, 1990). While in some cases, expressing anxious feelings or inner conflicts in a second language may create another source of psychological burden or anxiety in some students, writing personal journals or diaries, for instance, can provide them with a plenty of freedom in terms of time and security as well as a good opportunity for self-reflection and analysis (Mlynarczyk, 1998; Perez, 1998; Bishop, 1993). Since personal journals or diaries in particular are usually not supposed to be shared by anyone but the writer him/herself, they might be more suitable as a way of self-exploration than writing personal narratives as a classroom writing assignment.

Indeed, it is sometimes embarrassing and unnerving to reveal ourselves even in our L1 writing, but teachers can still encourage the students to engage in reflective and personal narrative writings by asking them to write about fictional characters who are supposedly involved in the situations similar to their own, or maybe they can correspond to the teacher in the form of a letter exchange or dialogue journal (Gebhard, 1996; Green & Green, 1993; Thomas, 1993), so that they can confide in each other without fear of being exposed to other students.

As students are given more opportunities to reflect on their own problems or difficulties lurking in their mind, there seem to emerge more chances that they can

find the ways of coping with such difficulties. In other words, such awareness-raising activities can serve as a valuable resource for initiating and even nurturing their human coping mechanisms for their own benefits. Although there is a good possibility that some of the students might become more anxious because of the self-revealing nature of such activities, it is also true that the value of self-reflection lies in its very processes of learning to know more about oneself, for it is certainly considered a hallmark of our human existence and growth.

Such advantages of writing over those of speaking seem to deserve more attention from both teachers and students, especially when they attempt to deal with the issue of anxiety collaboratively with a mix of written and spoken activities.

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