Teaching and Researching

Writing

Ken Hyland

Second Edition

Applied Linguistics in Action Series
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Teaching and Researching Writing

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Second Edition

Ken Hyland

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General editors' preface

Applied Linguistics *in Action*, as its name suggests, is a Series which focuses on the issues and challenge to teachers and researchers in a range of fields in Applied Linguistics and provides readers and users with the tools they need to carry out their own practice-related research.

The books in the Series provide the reader with clear, up-to-date, accessible and authoritative accounts of their chosen field within Applied Linguistics. Starting from a map of the landscape of the field, each book provides information on its main ideas and concepts, competing issues and unsolved questions. From there, readers can explore a range of practical applications of research into those issues and questions, and then take up the challenge of undertaking their own research, guided by the detailed and explicit research guides provided. Finally, each book has a section which is concurrently on the Series ***website*** (www.pearsoned.co.uk/alia) and which provides a rich array of resources, information sources and further reading, as well as a key to the principal concepts of the field.

Questions the books in this innovative Series ask are those familiar to all teachers and researchers, whether very experienced, or new to the fields of Applied Linguistics.

1. What does research tell us, what doesn't it tell us and what should it tell us about the field? How is the field mapped and landscaped? What is its geography?
2. How has research been applied and what interesting research possibilities does practice raise? What are the issues we need to explore and explain?

3. What are the key researchable topics that practitioners can undertake? How can the research be turned into practical action?
4. Where are the important resources that teachers and researchers need? Who has the information? How can it be accessed?

Each book in the Series has been carefully designed to be as accessible as possible, with built-in features to enable readers to find what they want quickly and to home in on the key issues and themes that concern them. The structure is to move from practice to theory and back to practice in a cycle of development of understanding of the field in question.

Each of the authors of books in the Series is an acknowledged authority, able to bring broad knowledge and experience to engage teachers and researchers in following up their own ideas, working with them to build further on *their* own experience.

Applied Linguistics *in Action* is an **in action** Series. Its website will keep you updated and regularly re-informed about the topics, fields and themes in which you are involved.

The first editions of books in this series have attracted widespread praise for their authorship, their design, and their content, and have been widely used to support practice and research. The success of the series, and the realization that it needs to stay relevant in a world where new research is being conducted and published at a rapid rate, have prompted the commissioning of this second edition. This new edition has been thoroughly updated, with accounts of research that has appeared since the first edition and with the addition of other relevant additional material. We trust that students, teachers and researchers will continue to discover inspiration in these pages to underpin their own investigations.

Chris Candlin & David Hall
General Editors

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Introduction

In some ways it is harder to rewrite than to write; one is constrained by the frame of the original yet there are things which need changing, others to delete, and more to discuss. But while the subject of writing has advanced through research and debate in the seven years since the first edition of this book, much of what we know about it, and about studying it, have remained more or less intact. Analysts have widened the scope of what they study to recognise the role of writing in areas such as conveying expertise and structuring identity, and have acknowledged its importance in fields such as forensic linguistics and rapidly changing internet communications such as blogs, wikis and twittering. Teachers too have moved on, making greater use of genre approaches to writing instruction and bringing computer communication more centrally into their work. Essentially, however, we are still concerned with writers, with readers, and with texts, although these may interact now in very different ways.

Those who know the first edition will recognise that I have retained the distinctive organisation of the series and also much of the content. All chapters have been extensively rewritten, but Chapters 2 and 4 are new. The intention behind the book also remains the same: to introduce readers to current thinking about writing: what we know of it, how we study it and how we teach it. My aim, then, is to provide a clear and critical introduction to the field of writing research and teaching.

Writing remains, of course, a central topic in applied linguistics and continues to be an area of lively intellectual research and debate in a range of disciplines. Its complex, multifaceted nature constantly evades adequate description and explanation, and many forms of enquiry have

been summoned to help clarify both how writing works and how it should best be taught. One factor, which both drives this interest and complicates its study, is the overarching significance it has in our lives, not only in our professional and social activities, but in determining our life chances. Writing is central to our personal experience and social identities, and we are often evaluated by our control of it. The various purposes of writing, its myriad contexts of use and the diverse backgrounds and needs of those wishing to learn it, all push the study of writing into wider frameworks of analysis and understanding.

This book seeks to identify and survey these frameworks, setting out the dominant paradigms, exploring their key concepts, elaborating some applications of writing research, raising some important researchable issues, and providing a compendium of resources on writing.

Like other books in this series, *Teaching and Researching Writing* is divided into four main sections. In Section I I provide a brief historical and conceptual overview of the field and examine some of the key issues that occupy writing researchers. My purpose here is to map the terrain. Chapter 1 explores the main approaches to the study of writing, examining their strengths and shortcomings, and describes their theoretical orientations, methods and contributions, while Chapter 2 looks more closely at some of the key issues raised by these research paradigms.

In Section II I turn to some of the ways that writing theory and research currently inform practice, drawing on examples from Australia, Hong Kong, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, England and North America, and which cover a range of age, proficiency and first-language contexts. Chapter 3 focuses on writing courses and Chapter 4 on pedagogic tools and methods, each case illustrating an element of the current debates on writing.

In Section III I discuss research issues and suggest some important areas which teachers, students or other practitioners can pursue through action research. Once again I present this section as a series of case-studies both to illustrate principal issues and to offer practical strategies for undertaking research in these areas. Chapter 5 discusses the nature of practitioner research, Chapter 6 presents research cases which involve methods of observation and reporting, and Chapter 7 examines examples of research into texts and contexts.

Finally, Section IV is a compendium of resources, indicating the major areas of writing research and practice and providing information on the key sources and contacts. In Chapter 8 I outline some of the main fields which contribute to our understanding of writing, and suggest a selection of key texts in these areas. In Chapter 9 I provide a

directory of the most important sources of information, professional associations and conferences relevant to teachers and researchers of writing. Finally, there is a glossary of selected terms.

In this way I hope to cover the main theories, issues, research methodologies and teaching applications in a way which reveals the strong cycle of practice–theory–practice inherent in the field of writing. I also hope that the book will encourage readers to engage with the issues discussed and explore some of the issues the book raises.

Section

Concepts and issues

Chapter 1

An overview of writing

This chapter will . . .

- explore approaches to teaching and research based on the main dimensions of writing: the code, the encoder, and the decoder;
- examine their principal ideas, key figures, significant findings and major weaknesses;
- consider how these approaches have influenced writing instruction.

In this chapter I discuss three broad approaches to researching and teaching writing, focusing in turn on theories that are mainly concerned with texts, with writers and with readers. I admit that this classification takes certain liberties, but I imply no rigid divisions, and in fact the approaches are only coherent to the extent that they respond to and critique each other. By focusing on writing in this way, however, I hope to highlight something of what we know about writing and what each offers to our understanding of this complex area.

Concept 1.1 **Approaches to writing**

- The first approach focuses on the products of writing by examining *texts*, either through their formal surface elements or their discourse structure.
- The second approach, divided into Expressivist, Cognitivist and Situated strands, focuses on the writer and describes writing in terms of the *processes* used to create texts.

- The third approach emphasises the role that *readers* play in writing, adding a social dimension to writing research by elaborating how writers engage with an audience in creating texts.

1.1 Text-oriented research and teaching

The first category focuses on the tangible, analysable aspects of writing by viewing it as a textual product. By looking at surface forms, these theories have in common an interest in the linguistic or rhetorical resources available to writers for producing texts, and so reduce the intricacies of human communication to the manageable and concrete. Text-focused theories have taken a variety of forms, but I will describe two broad approaches here, together with the beliefs about the teaching and learning of writing that they imply.

1.1.1 Texts as objects

The dominant model for many years saw writing as a textual product, a coherent arrangement of elements structured according to a system of rules.

Concept 1.2 **Texts as objects**

Based on ideas inherited from structuralism and implicit in the Transformational Grammar of Noam Chomsky, a basic premise of this approach is that texts are autonomous objects which can be analysed and described independently of particular contexts, writers, or readers. Texts have a structure, they are orderly arrangements of words, clauses and sentences, and by following grammatical rules writers can encode a full semantic representation of their intended meanings.

The idea that texts can function independently of a context carries important ideological implications, and one of the most serious is the mechanistic view that human communication works by transferring ideas from one mind to another via language (Shannon and Weaver, 1963). Writing is disembodied. It is removed from context and the personal experiences of writers and readers because meanings can be encoded in texts and recovered by anyone who speaks the same

language as the writer. Writers and readers conform to homogeneous practices so writing is treated like an object, and its rules imposed on passive users. This view of writing is still alive and kicking in a great deal of teaching of business writing and, indeed, is implicit in some notions of learning in western education systems. In many schools students are asked to write simply to demonstrate their knowledge of decontextualised facts with little awareness of a reader beyond the teacher–examiner. In these situations grammatical accuracy and clear exposition are often the main criteria of good writing.

Such a focus on form has led to considerable research into the regularities we find in texts. In recent years, for example, computer analyses of large corpora have been used to identify how functions such as stance (Biber, 2006) and negation (Tottie, 1991) are commonly expressed in writing. An orientation to formal features of texts has also underpinned a great deal of research into students' writing development. From this perspective, writing improvement can be measured by counting increases in features such as relative clauses, modality and passives through successive pieces of writing. White (2007), for instance, sought to assess language improvement in student writing by measuring increases in the number of morphemes, words and clauses in student essays. Shaw and Liu (1998), on the other hand, looked at features of academic writing such as impersonality, hedging and formality, and discovered 'a general move from a spoken to a written style' in essays in a three-month EAP presessional course.

From a perspective that regards texts as autonomous objects, then, learners' compositions are seen as *langue*, that is, a demonstration of the writer's knowledge of forms and his or her awareness of the system of rules to create texts. The goal of writing instruction therefore becomes training in accuracy, and for many years writing was essentially an extension of grammar teaching. Informed by a behavioural, habit-formation theory of learning, guided composition and substitution exercises became the main teaching methods, and these needed no context but the classroom and only the skill of avoiding errors. The teacher was an expert passing on knowledge to novices and there was a prescribed view of texts. This approach can still be found in classes around the world and survives in style guides, 'how to write effectively' books, and some textbooks.

But while this has been a major classroom approach for many years, the claim that good writing is context-free, that it is fully explicit and takes nothing for granted, draws on the rather old-fashioned and discredited belief that meaning is contained in the message. This lies

behind the familiar *conduit metaphor* of language: that we have thoughts which we form into words to send to others which they receive and find the same thoughts – so meanings correspond with words and writing is transparent in reflecting meanings rather than constructing them. So we transfer ideas from one mind to another through language and meanings can be written down and understood by anyone with the right encoding and decoding skills. A text says everything that needs to be said – so there are no conflicts of interpretations, no reader positions, no different understandings, because we all see things in the same way. Clearly this fails to take account of the beliefs and knowledge writers assume readers will draw on in reading their texts.

Quote 1.1 **On 'explicitness'**

A text is explicit not because it says everything all by itself but rather because it strikes a careful balance between what needs to be said and what may be assumed. The writer's problem is not just being explicit; the writer's problem is knowing what to be explicit about.

Nystrand, Doyle and Himley (1986: 81)

Even academic articles, the most seemingly explicit of genres, draw on readers' assumed understandings. Through features such as references to prior research, technical lexis and familiarity with particular argument forms, writers work to establish a coherent context and enrich propositional meanings (e.g. Bazerman, 1988; Hyland, 2004a). Equally, this is how lawyers justify their fees, by disputing the exact meaning of even the most precisely written contracts and other legal documents. In sum, inferences are always involved in recovering meanings: no text can be both coherent and context-free.

Teacher responses to writing in this perspective tend to focus on error correction and identifying problems in students' control of language rather than how meanings are being conveyed. Moreover, we can see an autonomous view of writing reflected in the design of many large international exams. Indirect assessments, typically multiple choice, cloze or error recognition tasks, are widely used in evaluating writing. But while they are sometimes said to be reliable measures of writing skill (e.g. DeMauro, 1992) and facilitate reliability, they have little

to do with the fact that communication, and not accuracy, is the purpose of writing. Moreover, even direct writing tasks, which require students to write one or two timed essays of a few hundred words, may lack 'authenticity' and provide little information about students' abilities to produce a sustained piece of writing for different audiences or purposes.

In fact, focusing on accuracy is exactly the wrong place to look for writing improvement as there is little evidence to show that either syntactic complexity or grammatical accuracy are the best measures of good writing. Many students can construct syntactically accurate sentences and yet are unable to produce appropriate written texts. Moreover, while fewer errors might be seen as an index of progress, this may equally indicate the writer's reluctance to take risks and reach beyond a current level of competence. To put this more directly, focusing exclusively on formal features of texts as a measure of writing competence ignores how texts are the writer's response to a particular communicative setting. Written texts cannot be autonomous precisely because they participate in a particular situation and reflect that situation in their pages.

Quote 1.2 Brandt on autonomous texts

Identifying the mode of a text or enumerating its T-unit length or the density and range of its cohesive devices may lend insights into the structure of written texts, however, it can describe only one or another static outcome of the writer's dynamic and complex effort to make meaning. Yet the finished text need not be abandoned in our pursuit to understand the composing act – not, that is, if we shift our focus from the formal features of an isolated text toward the whole text as an instance of language functioning in a context of human activity.

Brandt (1986: 93)

What this means for teaching is that no particular feature can be said to be a marker of good writing because what is 'good' varies across contexts. We can't just list the features needed to produce a successful text without considering appropriate purpose, audience, tone, formality, and so on. Simply, students don't just need to know how to write a grammatically correct text, but how to apply this knowledge for particular purposes and genres.

1.1.2 Texts as discourse

While an autonomous model views texts as forms which can be analysed independently of any real-life uses, another way of seeing writing as a material artefact looks beyond surface structures to see texts as ***discourse*** – the way we use language to communicate, to achieve purposes in particular situations. Here the writer is seen as having certain goals and intentions and the ways we write are resources to accomplish these. So instead of forms being disembodied and independent of contexts, a discourse approach sees them as located in social actions. Teachers following this line aim to identify the ways that texts actually work as communication by linking language forms to purposes and contexts.

> Concept 1.3 **Discourse**
>
> Discourse refers to language in action, and to the purposes and functions linguistic forms serve in communication. Here the linguistic patterns of texts point to contexts beyond the page, implying a range of social constraints and choices which operate on writers in any situation. The writer has certain goals and intentions, certain relationships to his or her readers, and certain information to convey, and the forms of a text are resources used to accomplish these. These factors draw the analyst into a wider perspective which locates texts in a world of communicative purposes and social action, identifying the ways that texts actually work as communication.

A variety of approaches has considered texts as discourse, but all have tried to discover how writers organise language to produce coherent, purposeful prose. An early contribution was the 'functional sentence perspective' of the Prague School which sought to describe how we structure text to represent our assumptions about what is known (*given*) or *new* to the reader (e.g. Firbas, 1986). This was taken up and elaborated in the work of Halliday (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004) in the concept of *theme–rheme* structure. Roughly, theme is what the writer is talking about and rheme what he or she is saying about it: the part of the message that the writer considers important. Theme and rheme help writers organise clauses into information units that push the communication forward through a text and make it easy for readers to follow. This is because we expect old information to come first as a context for new, but breaking this pattern can be confusing. In (1), for example, the writer establishes a pattern in which the rheme of the first

sentence becomes the themes of the next three, clearly signposting the progression. The theme of the final sentence, however, breaks the sequence, surprising the reader and disturbing processability.

(1) Non-verbal communication is traditionally divided into paralanguage, proxemics, body language and haptics. Paralanguage refers to the non-verbal vocal signs that accompany speech. Proxemics concerns physical distance and orientation. Body language describes expression, posture and gesture. The study of touch is called haptics.

A different strand of research has tried to identify the rhetorical functions of particular discourse units, examining what pieces of text are trying to do and how they fit into a larger structure. Winter (1977) and Hoey (1983), for example, distinguish several patterns which they label *problem-solution*, *hypothetical-real* and *general-particular*. They show that even with no explicit signalling, readers are able to draw on their knowledge of recognisable text patterns to infer the connections between clauses, sentences or groups of sentences. For example, we all have a strong expectation of how a problem–solution pattern will progress, so that we look for a positive evaluation of at least one possible solution to complete the pattern. This pattern is illustrated in Concept 1.4 below.

Concept 1.4 **Problem–solution pattern**

1. *Situation*: We now accept that grammar is not restricted to writing but is present in speech.
2. *Problem*: This can lead to assumptions that there is one kind of grammar for writing and one for speech.
3. *Response*: A large-scale corpus survey of English has been undertaken.
4. *Evaluation of response*: Results show the same system is valid for both writing and speech.

(Example based on a conference abstract.)

These kinds of descriptions lead us to the idea that we must draw on some notion of shared assumptions to account for what we recognise as connected text. That is to say, part of what makes writing coherent lies in the reader's background knowledge and interpretive abilities rather than in the text. One model of how this is done suggests that readers call on their conventionalised knowledge to impose a coherent frame on a message. They interpret discourse by analogy with their earlier

experiences which are organised in their heads as *scripts* or *schemata* (e.g. Schank and Abelson, 1977). Thus we carry around stereotypical understandings which we use as 'scaffolding' to interpret the texts we encounter every day, allowing us to read texts as diverse as detective thrillers and postcards.

A second approach, more pragmatic than this cognitive model, proposes that writers try to create texts which are as relevant to readers as possible, and that readers anticipate this when recovering meaning. This approach originates with Grice's (1975) principles of conversational inference, which try to explain successful communication in terms of interactants' mutual assumptions of rationality and cooperation. Building on this idea, Sperber and Wilson (1986) argue that readers construct meanings by comparing the information they find in a text with what they already know about the context to establish meanings that are relevant. In other words, when we interpret a text, we assume that the writer is being cooperative by thinking of what it is we need to know to fully understand what is going on, and so we look for ways of interpreting what we read as relevant to the ongoing discourse in some way.

In these theories, interpretation depends on the ability of readers to supply needed assumptions from memory, but the text itself also plays an important part in this process. Kramsch argues that the construction of meaning from texts is a rhetorical and not just a cognitive process, and proposes seven principles of text interpretation which draw on current theories of discourse analysis.

Quote 1.3 Principles of a rhetorical approach to text interpretation

1. Texts both refer to a reality beyond themselves and a relationship to their readers.
2. The meaning of texts is inseparable from surrounding texts, whether footnotes, diagrams or conversations. Intertextuality refers to the extent our texts echo other texts.
3. Texts attempt to position readers in specific ways by evoking assumed shared schemata.
4. Schemata are created by relating one text or fact to another through logical links.
5. Schemata reflect the ways of thinking of particular communities or cultures.