

Title	A synthesis of studies on learning how to mean in adolescent L2 writing
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Issue Date	2018
Issue Number	6
Paper Number	8
Citation	Xuan, W. (2018). <i>A synthesis of studies on learning how to mean in adolescent L2 writing</i> (Working Paper Series No. 8, Issue 6, 2018). Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, College of Professional and Continuing Education, Hong Kong Community College. Retrieved Aug 27, 2018 from http://weblib.cpce-polyu.edu.hk/apps/wps/assets/pdf/w20180608.pdf
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A Synthesis of Studies on Learning How to Mean in Adolescent L2 Writing

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I focus on surveying the literature on adolescent L2 writing from the perspective of learning how to mean. I retrieved most of the published studies on adolescent L2 writing from 1990 to 2015. I summarized different themes from these studies, such as, factors that influence adolescent L2 writing, adolescent L2 writing teaching and assessing. I concentrated on exploring the findings from different themes, like, (1) Adolescent identity; (2) Home and community influence; (3) Internet and new technology; (4) L1 influence; (5) Classroom instruction; (6) Feedback and error correction; and (7) Assessment. I delineated the overall picture in the field and finding out possible research avenues for future researchers in this field. For example, longitudinal, developmental, L2 writing curriculum research perspectives are proposed for future researchers in the field. The synthesis found that adolescent L2 writing is an emerging field and more research attention is deserved.

KEYWORDS: Adolescent L2 Writing; L2 Writing; Research Synthesis

1 INTRODUCTION

In a study of contributions to the Journal of Second Language Writing, Matsuda & De Pew (2002) found that of all of the articles in this journal, just 3% of them were concerned with adolescent L2 writing. Findings by Parks, Huot, Hamers & Lemonnier (2005) and Roca de Larios, Murphy & Marín (2002) also indicate that research on adolescent L2 writing is relatively scanty. There exist many research gaps in the investigation of adolescent L2 writing. Ortmeier-Hooper & Enright (2011) pointed out that adolescent second language writers are a group of “unique” and “distinct” young second language (L2) learners, with unique characteristics, including their age, educational background, their community, their peer group identity. More attention should be paid to this group for the following other reasons: Harklau & Pinnow’s (2009) study showed that one fifth of children in the U.S. are immigrants, and this group of learners belongs to the biggest population of L2 learners in the U.S.; in the same study, they concluded that most of the L2 writing research focuses on tertiary level. There is less “spot light” on this special group of secondary school L2 learners, compared with the tertiary level students.

This paper addresses the following questions by reviewing the literature on learning how to mean in adolescent second language writing:

- (1) What areas have been investigated in the field of adolescent second language writing?
- (2) What are the gaps in the field? Which research direction shall be paid attention to?

Based on the literature on L2 writing, I divide this paper into two major streams: literature on comparison of adolescent L1 and L2 writings and literature on adolescent second language writing instruction related issues.

2 LITERATURE ON COMPARISON OF ADOLESCENT L1 AND L2 WRITING

I have summarized the comparison of the literature adolescent L1 and L2 writing in Table 1, as follows: I divide the comparison into two major groups. The first group as shown by Table 1 is called pre-writing and while-writing study, while the second group is called post-writing study.

(i) As we can see in Table 1, there are three areas that have been studied in pre-writing and while-writing writing study.

(1) Planning process: findings by de Courcy (de Courcy, 2002) show that adolescent second language writers depend heavily on L1 in structuring and thinking about their writing; they will translate the L1 text into L2.

Table 1 Comparison of adolescent L1 and L2 writing

Areas compared		Adolescent L1 writing	Adolescent L2 writing
Pre-and-while writing comparison	Planning process (de Courcy, 2002)	Writers use mother language, save time, think faster	Use mother tongue in thinking and translate the thoughts into L2, more time consuming.
	Writing process (Abu-Rabia, 2003)	Mother language can help writers save time in expressing their ideas	L2 language proficiency counts a lot in expressing their ideas, less sophisticated
	Text formulation (Roca de Larios, Marín, & Murphy, 2001)	Less laborious, less cognitive work	Need more time and cognitive work
Post-writing comparison	Errors (Yu & Atkinson, 1988)	Fewer errors	Various errors, even after ample instruction
	Information in text (Reynolds, 2005)	Denser	Less information
	Employment of grammar (Reynolds, 2005)	Varies in employment and can change in different genres	Have idiosyncratic use of some grammatical items
	Vocabulary used (Hinkel, 2002; Laufer, 1998; Reynolds, 2005)	Less time in thinking and choosing the words	Depend on language proficiency, smaller in size, more colloquial, less academic

(2) Writing process: Abu-Rabia (2003) found that adolescent L2 writers spend more time in thinking and planning their writing, compared with adolescent L1 writers. Their output will be relatively downgraded because of the cognitive load of thinking and structuring.

(3) Text formulation: When it comes to the text formulation, adolescent second language writers tend to spend more time in generating the text, especially it costs them more cognitive load in solving the problem of vocabulary and structure (Roca de Larios, et al., 2001) .

(ii) Concerning the final products of adolescent L2 learners, previous studies have generated the following findings. No matter how long or how much input the adolescent L2 learners received, errors from various grammatical levels still exist in their L2 writing (Silva, 1993; Yu & Atkinson, 1988). In addition, adolescent L2 learners' texts contain less information than their L1 cohort's (Reynolds, 2005). Adolescent L2 writers employ simpler grammatical resources to construct their texts than their L1 cohorts do, like simpler structure (Reynolds, 2005), smaller size of vocabulary, more colloquial and less academic (Hinkel, 2002; Laufer, 1998)

3 LITERATURE ON ADOLESCENT L2 WRITING INSTRUCTION AND RELATED ISSUES

I will discuss the instruction related literature concerning adolescent second language writing in this section. According to what I have summarized in the literature in this section, there are 7 main sub-fields in adolescent L2 writing instruction.

Table 2 Literature on adolescent L2 writing and related issues

Different perspectives	Topics
Factors that influence adolescent L2 writing	(1) Adolescent identity (2) Home and community influence (3) Internet and new technology (4) L1 influence
Adolescent L2 writing teaching and assessing	(1) Classroom instruction (2) Feedback and error correction (3) Assessment

3.1 Factors that influence adolescent L2 writing

Factors that influence adolescent L2 writing encompass four branches, which are adolescent identity, home and community influence, internet and new technology and L1 influence.

3.1.1 Adolescent identity

Construction of Identity through L2 writing is a very important topic in adolescent L2 writing learning and development. Harklau (2011) found that learning writing in L2 is not just learning the language and culture in that particular language, instead the students will also recognize and show their identity in this process, and for example, how they see themselves as L2 writers (Matsuda, Canagarajah, Harklau, Hyland & Warschauer, 2003). And also adolescents have a lot of different identity markers in their daily lives to distinguish themselves from others (Schoonen & Appel, 2005), for example, they have different hairstyles, belong to different social groups. And the language they use is also one of their identity markers (Schoonen & Appel, 2005). Cummins' (2000) findings show that adolescent L2 writers' literacy development will be influenced seriously by their sense of identity engagement and affirmation. There are also other studies that show that students will have a sense of identities in their L2 writing. Weinstein (2002) found that bilingual adolescent L2 writers used different forms of writing to express their sense of belonging and identity. Lam's (2000; 2004) study shows that the Internet provided a platform for young L2 writers to express their social identity with other young L2 writers. Lam (2000) even found that a Chinese adolescent used English L2 writing to develop his own social identity online in his self-founded forum. The study of adolescent L2 writers' identity in L2 writing is a relatively new field. More studies should be conducted in this field in different contexts and different societies to give us a more in-depth understanding of this group of writers.

3.1.2 Home and community's influence on adolescent L2 writing

Studies by Fu (1995), García (1999) and Weinstein (2002) show that adolescent L2 writers wrote a lot about their lives outside school, but the school-based curriculum will overlook these practices. Teachers will focus mainly on academic writing. There are many ways for writing instruction out of school. Villalva's (2006) study revealed that Spanish students will rely on social networks as the first hand resources for their reference in writing. For minority students, researchers also recommend autobiography and family history methods to motivate students to write (Barbieri, 1998; Black, 2005; Blair, 1991; Toffoli & Allan,

1992; Vreeland, 1998). However, there are different opinions about autobiographical writing too. Harklau (2000) claimed that adolescent immigrants would lose a lot of chances to gain multilingual experiences and to establish their identities if they focus on writing autobiography too much as part of their learning. Callahan (2002) contended that multimodal theory should be employed in adolescent L2 writing. One group of scholars (Landay et al., 2001) employed the method of translating students' family pictures into poems, stories and gave a performance based on these. Wolfe (1996) suggested adolescent L2 writing should extend the students' context outside classroom to enrich and gain more to feedback students' learning.

3.1.3 Internet and new technology

The Internet and technology play an indispensable role in our lives nowadays. We can see their impact on adolescent L2 writing studies too. The adoption of Internet-based technology in the learning environment leads to higher motivation among students, which also helps them develop better friendship with their classmates and have better communication with others (Fedderholdt, 2001; Strasser, 1995). Exchanging email also helps students to improve their L2 writing. Young (2003) found that students were more willing to talk and exchange controversial topics in their daily lives by email. This practice provides another way for students to write. Black's (2005) findings also revealed that online forums help students improve their L2 writing by providing them with a lot of feedback. However, some of the research demonstrates that the Internet and new technology were not so promising (Alvermann & Heron, 2001). But, with the development of the Internet and internet-based technology, we cannot exclude adolescents from these platforms.

3.1.4 L1 influence

Studies show that L1 and L2 writing abilities are correlated (Schoonen et al., 2003). However, there are not so many studies on L1 influence on adolescent L2 writing. The influence of L1 in writing instruction is a controversial topic. Different studies have produced different views and results. Yu & Atkinson (1988) found that even when English is used as medium of instruction in writing classes in Hong Kong, students' writing was still very poor. In a later study, Pennington (1996) showed that how much L1 should be used in writing classes depends on the classroom culture: whether it is teacher-centered or student-centered; and it also depends on students' proficiency, academic performance. A study by Swain & Lapkin (2000) demonstrated that use of L1 in French in a Canada program supported the development L2. Other studies also show that language instruction is less important than the writing instruction and experience (Dyer & Friederich, 2002; Kobayashi & Rinnert, 2002). However, Garcia (1999) found that which language is used in instruction, L1 or L2, does not matter if the student doesnot have the motivation to write.

3.2 Adolescent L2 writing teaching and assessing

Adolescent L2 writing teaching and assessing are the most popular fields that researchers have been interested in. They can be grouped into three areas: classroom instruction, feedback and error correction, and assessment.

3.2.1 Classroom instruction

Studies by Fu (1995); García (1999); Harklau (1994); Pennington, Brock & Yue (1996) indicate that writing instruction in adolescent L2 writing is a very complicated topic. Different secondary schools have adopted different approaches. Teachers' attitudes and teaching methods (Pennington, Brock & Yue, 1996; Stepp-Greany, 2004) will have impact on the writing instruction. A study by Pennington (1996) revealed that students' academic performance will also influence the instruction. There is still not so much research on L2 instruction in this field.

3.2.2 Feedback and error correction

The study of teachers' feedback on second language writing is not a new field, and researchers have adopted many different perspectives (Lee, 1997; 2003a; 2003b; 2004; 2005; 2007b; 2008a; 2008b; 2009b; 2011b; 2011d). For the marking of errors in writing, Lee (2003a; 2003b) found that most teachers mark the students' errors comprehensively, but the teachers themselves cannot see the significance in doing this tiresome job in the long run. The other perspective is to look at the students' reactions towards feedback. Students want more written feedback from their teachers (Lee, 2008a) and they rely too much on their teachers' direct marking of their errors and they even think that error correction is the teacher's responsibility (Lee, 2005). In addition to these studies, there are other studies on researching teacher perception on feedback. Lee's (2009b) findings revealed that there exist ten mismatches between teachers' belief and feedback practice. Therefore, in a subsequent study, Lee (2009a) suggests that teachers should follow the three stages (before giving feedback, while giving feedback and after giving feedback). Lee (2007b; 2011b) advocated a revolution in feedback and she recommended using formative assessment in the teaching of writing.

3.2.3 Assessment

There are very small patches of studies of adolescent second language writing assessment. Lee (2007a; 2007b) introduced formative assessment into adolescent second language writing assessment practice in Hong Kong. In a subsequent study, Lam & Lee (2010) found that students responded positively to portfolio assessment, but they still favored summative grading. For the implementation of formative assessment in the Hong Kong context, Lee (2011a; 2011c) also did some further study from teachers' perspective. Her findings show that applying formative assessment in adolescent L2 writing teaching can save time for teachers in preparing and scaffolding their students. She also concluded that in the exam-oriented context in Hong Kong, there are still some obstacles to implementing formative assessment in daily teaching. These initial studies help us deepen our understanding of how to assess our teaching and students' learning in a new way. But, more study in other contexts should be conducted to get more insight into adolescent L2 writing assessment.

4 DISCUSSION

Adolescent second language writing research is really interdisciplinary, including contributions from composition studies, second language acquisition, bilingual education and literacy studies (Harklau, 2011). As we can see from the review above, the literature in this field is relatively sparse and there are many gaps. I have the following observations.

First, Reynolds (2005) mentions that adolescent second language L2 writing development can be considered as the process of mastering a wide range of different written genres. And Matthiessen (2006) emphasized that as learners' progress, learning is increasingly a matter of expanding one's registerial repertoire in expanding ranges of contexts; but this insight has not been reflected in the literature. The expansion of a learner's registerial repertoire is one manifestation of the growth of his or her (personal) meaning potential.

Second, most of the previous studies are cross-sectional studies as indicated in this review. Longitudinal studies are rare.

Third, on linguistic features of adolescent L2 writers' text, Hinkel (2002) conducted a systematic study of L2 texts with a corpus of 1457 essays by college students, totaling 434,768 words. She used the data in this corpus to compare those writings of native English speakers and non-native speakers' output linguistic feature differences. However, most of the studies that focus on linguistic features in adolescent L2 studies are on studying the error

features in their texts (Reynolds, 2002, 2005). Studies involving linguistic analysis of adolescent L2 writers' written texts are still scanty. Therefore, there are research gaps from this perspective.

Last, we can see that some of the studies included in the literature reviewed above relate their findings to curriculum design and feedback as part of writing instruction. Kiernan (1991) advocated that the writing curriculum should incorporate community service learning. But, I haven't found any studies where research findings are applied to the design of writing textbooks or of writing curricula, while this is quite important in the context of English as a second language, especially in Asia.

5 CONCLUSION

Based on the present synthesis, I suggest that there are several areas in the field of adolescent L2 writing we could pay more attention. First, more studies focus on the development of adolescent L2 writing shall be conducted. In addition, longitudinal perspective is favored if we would like to obtain more insights from this group of writers. Secondly, studies concentrate on L2 writing materials and curriculum development is preferred. Adolescent L2 writing research is still at its very early stage if we compare it with studies L2 writing at tertiary level. If we would like to know more about the problems in L2 writing at tertiary level, we shall not only focus on college student but go back to look at what they have learnt at secondary level.

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