
Reviewed by Stephanie Vandrick, University of San Francisco

In October 1998, I was fortunate to be one of about 100 attendees at the First Annual Symposium on Second Language Writing, held at Purdue University and organized by Tony Silva and Paul Kei Matsuda, the editors of the book under review here. It was a breakthrough occasion, as second language (L2) writing is an emerging field, one that has only in the past few years become a clearly separate area of focus, at the intersection of the two disciplines of first language (L1) writing (rhetoric and composition) and second language instruction. There was a palpable feeling of excitement in the air as we gathered to examine that intersection and its implications. Sixteen leading scholars in the field had been invited to speak. Since all participants were gathered together for all sessions, and continued the conversations over group meals and in hallway discussions, there was a tremendous sense that symposium participants—both speakers and attendees—were part of a group effort in moving the new discipline forward. In addition, there was a sense of pride that the area in which participants were all working was finally being acknowledged and valued. Veteran readers of Composition Studies—mainly L1 composition scholars and teachers—may identify with this feeling of pride when they remember that it was not so very many years ago that L1 writing was itself just becoming acknowledged as a separate discipline with its own conferences and publications.

So it was with a feeling of anticipation that I read On Second Language Writing, a collection of the papers given by 15 of the symposium speakers. I hoped that the book would capture at least some of the excitement of the symposium to share with a much larger audience, and to a large extent, it does so. What it loses in immediacy, it gains from the fact that the book is not simply "conference proceedings" but rather consists of revised and polished versions of the original papers; at least some of the contributors clearly revised their papers partially in response to the interchanges that took place at the symposium. The resulting volume is a major contribution to the emerging field of L2 writing, and will be of interest to anyone who teaches writing, particularly at the college level, to the multicultural, multilingual students who make up such a large proportion of students today, particularly in the United States.

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At the symposium, each paper was paired with another on the same or a closely related topic, and in at least one case the paired papers presented opposing views. In the book under review, that structure has not been explicitly preserved, but some (generally rather loose) topical pairings are still discernible, as pointed out in the preface. For example, “Chapters Two and Three focus on student second language writers” (xii) and “Chapters Thirteen and Fourteen take up the issue of articulation between L2 writing and other fields of study” (xv).

Because the field of L2 writing springs from and is influenced by the disciplines of rhetoric and composition, applied linguistics, educational theory, and even sociological, political, and cultural theory, there is a wide range of possible topics for a book such as this one, and in fact the topics addressed here are quite diverse. Barbara Kroll begins with an autobiographical piece on the life of an L2 writing teacher, reminding us that all theory and pedagogy must reflect the real lives of the real human beings involved. Kroll’s piece is also an example of the use of personal narrative in published academic work, something that has increasingly been found in L1 composition journals and books but until recently almost never in L2 writing/ESL scholarship. In an important and refreshing reminder of the centrality of students themselves (Chapter Two), Ilona Leki focuses on the individuality and particular needs of L2 writing students, reviewing research studies that include students’ own voices—the critical point here—talking about their experiences in L2 writing classes. In Chapter Three, Pat Currie follows up on this theme of examining the specific needs of L2 writing students, discussing issues of “power and control” in classrooms and institutions. William Grabe, in Chapter Four, examines various theories in L2 writing, and writes of the need for a distinct and comprehensive theory of the discipline; his rather discouraged tone makes readers wonder if such a creature can or will ever come to be. Next, in one of the most innovative and thought-provoking chapters, on a topic too seldom discussed in L2 writing, Diane Belcher asks “Does Second Language Writing Have Gender?”, and explores recent manifestations of a concern with gender in areas ranging from research paradigms to discourse styles. In Chapter Six, Lynn Goldstein examines current research on teacher-written commentary, and in Chapter Seven, Charlene Polio discusses methodological issues in L2 writing research, focusing on case studies. Chapter Eight, by Liz Hamp-Lyons, also reports on historical and recent research, in this case on writing assessment.

Moving to somewhat more (overtly) political topics, Trudy Smoke in Chapter Nine addresses ways to best and most equitably serve ESL students in United States universities, particularly in the face of a conservative backlash against resources being given to immigrant L2 students, and Joy
Reid, in Chapter Ten, discusses curricular design and pedagogy from the perspectives of student need and institutional demand. The next two chapters then very explicitly focus, from two quite different and somewhat oppositional stances, on the political nature of L2 writing instruction, and particularly on the currently increasing attention paid to politics, especially by proponents of critical pedagogy, in the field. On one side of the issue, in her chapter entitled “Critical Pragmatism: A Politics of L2 Composition,” Sarah Benesch outlines reasons for the recent focus on politics and critical thinking, describes the resistance among many to such attention to politics, and sets out ways in which the two viewpoints can be reconciled. In the illuminating combination of theory and practice for which her work is known, Benesch provides concrete examples from the classroom. In contrast to Benesch’s stance, Terry Santos, in “The Place of Politics in Second Language Writing,” argues that politics, especially progressive politics, are generally inappropriate in and largely irrelevant to the L2 writing classroom, where she believes the focus should be the practical matter of gaining writing skills necessary to succeed in the university and beyond. This dialogue between Benesch and Santos is a particularly timely and important one, as many recent articles, books, and conference papers testify that the discipline of L2/ESL writing is now actively grappling with the rather contentious issues that these authors address.

The final three chapters focus on issues of articulation and standards. Joan Carson, in Chapter Thirteen, writes about the dual and intersecting goals of L2 writing instruction: students’ developing and improving writing ability as well as successfully acquiring a second language. Thus L2 writing scholarship and pedagogy must be articulated with second language acquisition (SLA) research and teaching methodology. Carol Severino, in Chapter fourteen, looks at the differing and sometimes clashing demands of L2 and L1 writing programs and personnel within a university, and at the difficulties of the “go-between” role she and many other composition scholars and educators take on out of necessity. Alister Cumming’s concluding chapter outlines the knotty difficulties of setting standards for L2 writing research, curricula, and pedagogy and for the desired achievement levels for L2 writing students.

The chapters in this book vary quite widely in genre, format, style, and length. They range from personal narratives to traditional academic articles. Some chapters are fairly neutral surveys of a given topic, while others take very definite stances on the issues in question. Some focus on qualitative research, others on quantitative research. Some are straightforward and matter-of-fact, while others are essayistic. Silva and Matsuda acknowledge these differences in their preface, and state that they consider these and other differences in emphasis and style as a strength,
believing that the papers complement each other. In general I agree with their assertion, but some readers may be mildly disconcerted by an occasional sense of unevenness. However, all of the chapters in their various ways expose readers to major issues, providing a very good survey of current scholarship in the field. Furthermore, the chapters are generally very accessible, quite readable, and in most cases rather engaging, all of which will earn readers’ gratitude.

The editors also acknowledge another limitation to this collection, the fact that “for the most part, it addresses work done in North America with young adult second language writers,” and they note that in other projects they are working on, they plan to “draw attention to work in second language writing done in other languages and contexts and to help make the field more inclusive” (xvi). Since the editors of and contributors to this collection have been among the pioneers in creating a separate field of L2 writing, both in their prior scholarship and specifically in this book, it would be unfair to focus on what is missing rather than on what they have done well: They have set out the beginnings of an outline of the field of L2 writing as it exists at this point in its young history.

The portrait of L2 writing that this book provides will be very useful to many, both those specifically engaged in L2 writing scholarship and instruction, and those engaged in related and intersecting areas such as ESL, applied linguistics, rhetoric/composition, bilingual education, language policy, and educational theory and policy. It would be particularly useful and important for L1 writing scholars/teachers to read this book. Although the two fields clearly overlap in many ways, and should communicate regularly, it is, unfortunately, generally the case that L2 writing scholars are much more familiar with the discipline of L1 writing than L1 writing scholars are with the discipline of L2 writing. Thus, I hope that this book will be assigned in undergraduate and graduate classes on writing research and pedagogy, including but definitely not limited to (the far fewer) classes focusing particularly on L2 writing.

Thinking about where this volume might be most read and used leads to speculation about how, in these days of shifting disciplinary borders, the new discipline of L2 writing will develop. Will it continue to refine its separate identity as a field of study? Will it perhaps be absorbed into a more comprehensive discipline of rhetoric/composition, with no need for separate designations for L1 and L2? Or will it perhaps reconfigure itself in some other way that we cannot yet predict or even imagine?

In closing, I would like to note a laudable and distinctive characteristic of this book: throughout the volume there is a clearly manifested and consistent focus on the people who are the reason for all this scholarship: L2 writing students themselves. I believe that this concern with
the multifaceted reality and needs and lives of actual students is a defining characteristic of L2 writing research and instruction, so it is appropriate and encouraging to see this characteristic concern displayed so clearly in the book *On Second Language Writing*. Tony Silva and Paul Kei Matsuda are to be commended for editing this fine contribution to second language writing scholarship.

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Inspired by a similar collection in which 62 contemporary philosophers tell how they fell in love with philosophy, *Living Rhetoric and Composition* began as an invitation to established scholars in the field to tell “how they came to fall in love with the written word and with teaching” (xv). Framed by a brief foreword written by Andrea Lunsford and afterword by Jacqueline Jones Royster, and followed by an extensive annotated bibliography, the nineteen narratives collected in this volume give us the professional—and often intensely personal—life of the discipline as told from the first-person perspective of some of its most prominent scholars. The narratives themselves are as various as the voices that give life to them. Some of the contributors opt for hybrid forms that interweave the rhetoric of composition with other rhetorics: the rhetoric of the road (Theresa Enos), the rhetoric of Bob Barker (William Covino), or even the rhetoric of bear and elk tracks discovered in Graveyard Canyon, New Mexico (Stuart Brown). Others, like Richard Fulkerson’s “How Way Leads on to Way” or Edward Corbett’s “How I Became a Teacher of Composition,” seem to take their task more literally. All, however, manage to interweave the personal and the professional until it becomes difficult to tell them apart. And all demand to be read, not only for what they say about what it means to “make it” in this field, but also for how such stories go on making and remaking the field through the act of their telling.

In the preface to the collection, the editors state that they have “compiled this collection with multiple audiences in mind,” hoping to appeal to experienced scholars and novices alike. As their decision to append a bibliography titled “A Guide to Professional Development” might suggest, however, it is particularly with an eye toward joining the growing conversation on professionalization that this book seems to take its final shape. Recommending the book for courses in professional development