ABSTRACT

Assessing L2 Writing Development: The Case of Chinese as a Foreign Language

Scholarly attention has recently been paid to the exploration of research interfaces between second language (L2) writing and second language acquisition (SLA). Studies have found that some features of writing contribute positively to L2 learners’ language development (Manchon, 2011; Manchon & Roca de Larios, 2011), for example, the slower pace and permanent record of writing. Both of these features can promote learners’ noticing and explicit learning to facilitate language acquisition (Ortega, 2012; Williams, 2012). In addition, researchers have argued for inclusion of additional elements, such as L2 proficiency, to broaden the scope of research into the L2 writing-SLA interface. Prior studies (Leki et al., 2008) that explore the relationship between L2 proficiency and learners’ writing development conclude that L2 proficiency seems to play a complex role in the development of L2 writing, and thus call for more studies in the future.

This study further explores the L2 writing-SLA interface by including the variable of L2 proficiency and broadening L2 to one of the less commonly taught languages, the Chinese language. It explores the development of writing skills by L2 Chinese learners at different instructional levels in the foreign language learning environment. A total of 25 college-level students who were studying Chinese as a foreign language at two universities in the U.S. participated in this study. All participants, though at different universities, were asked to handwrite essays by responding to the same writing topics. Both in-class timed essays and out-of-class written assignments were collected for one academic semester. For the out-of-class assignments, participants were also asked to indicate the exam time duration they used to complete the written assignment.

Data were analyzed both holistically and analytically. The collected essays were first assigned a writing proficiency level according to the ACTFL writing proficiency guidelines. Then each essay was analyzed in terms of its fluency, accuracy, complexity, content, and organization, and each measure was subdivided into different sub-measures. For example, the accuracy of each writing was subdivided into character accuracy, lexical accuracy, and syntactic accuracy. All of the data were first analyzed by two researchers independently, and then a unified score for each sub-measure was obtained after discussion.

Preliminary analysis showed that learners’ overall proficiency of writing seems not to develop with their increased instructional levels, but some analytic measures of learners’ writings show improvement when learners’ instructional levels increase. In addition, similar lexical and syntactic features were found in writings of learners across instructional levels. Based on the results, implications of character instruction and writing instruction were also discussed.
References


