

# DIALOGIC WRITING : EFL WRITERS NEGOTIATING TEXT AND CONTEXTS PART 2

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DIALOGIC WRITING  
—EFL WRITERS NEGOTIATING TEXT AND CONTEXTS—  
PART 2

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The present study as a whole intends to investigate how EFL writers negotiate textual features and contextual resources in composing and how such process of negotiation influences the quality of their compositions. It also tries to clarify how variables claimed to affect L2 composition, including L2 proficiency and educational background in L2 composition, are related to other critical factors regarding dialogic negotiation of text and contexts.

This paper is the continuation of the last one (Kohro, 2009) which portrayed the theoretical foundation of the entire study. The last one elaborated on the concept of dialogic writing, using Linell's (1998) dialogic perspective on communication, on the basis of which the entire study is constructed. In this paper, the author introduces a limited number of previous studies on ESL writing conducted in this perspective, discusses variables affecting L2 composition, and presents its research questions with rationales. In the final section, its methodological foundation will be portrayed.

### *The State of Knowledge Available from Previous Research*

#### *L2 writing studies involving dialogic negotiation*

As mentioned above, second language writing studies focusing on peer revision (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1992; Zhang, 1995; Carson and Nelson, 1996; Villamil & De Guerrero, 1996; Nelson and Carson, 1998) or collaborative work between teachers and students (Conrad & Goldstein, 1999; Bloch, 2002; Adam & Artemeva, 2002) seem to theoretically involve dialogic negotiation between participants, but these studies do not especially refer to Bakhtin's concept of dialogic negotiation. Thus, those done on the basis of Bakhtin's concept of dialogic negotiation is quite limited in number. (Schaub, 1995; Spack, 1997; Olver, 2002; Adam & Artemeva, 2002)

Schaub (1995) employed Bakhtin's concept of dialogue in exploring English instruction through journal production by Egyptian ESL writers who were interacting in writing (not through e-mail correspondence) with their audience students living in the U.S.A. He maintains that the Bakhtinian view is quite applicable in the ESL situation in that the view sees all communication as cross-cultural. The dialogues discussed in this study were concerned with those between Egyptian ESL learners and audience readers who were fellow students in other countries. Unfortunately, empirical evidence supporting his view is not available.

Also, in the study conducted by Adam & Artemeva (2002), Bakhtin's notions of utterance and addressivity were employed in relation to the learner's use of a dialogic medium of communication, an electronic newsgroup. They concluded that, through the

collaborative electronic problem solving and discussions, the EAP students were able to get a sense of text as dynamic and situated, demonstrating sophisticated rhetorical strategies.

Using a longitudinal case study over three years which involved taped interviews, classroom observations, text analysis, Spack (1997) investigated how an undergraduate student drew upon multiple resources as she gradually developed strategies to become a proficient reader and writer while interacting with her instructors in a university setting. Cumming (1998) introduces this study, saying that Spack (1997) highlights Bakhtin's theories of the dialogue and intertextual nature of literacy. Although she does not seem to refer to Bakhtin's theories directly in the study, it is obvious that such critical concepts were employed as the foundation of the study.

Another case study is Olver's (1999) which investigated how rhetorical strategy of negotiation was used in the discourse of a Haitian American young adult who immigrated to the United States as a child. The study concluded that the participant used negotiation as a rhetorical strategy and that writers, speakers, and audiences could reach satisfying understandings in many kinds of rhetorical situations. In this study, negotiation as a rhetorical strategy, rather than actual interactions between interlocutors, was portrayed, analyzing an oral presentation and a written thesis.

These are a limited number of ESL studies based on Bakhtin's theories as far as I have searched, but each study seems to apply a different aspect of his theories to second language writing. Even the concept of 'dialogic negotiation' may be treated differently from one researcher to another. This is a matter of course in consideration

of the ambiguous nature of the concept, 'dialogic negotiation.' The dialogues in the first two studies are assumed to be present between participants writing letters or e-mail messages and their audience readers, but in the case of the third one, a wide variety of dialogic interactions can be inferred, for example, between the student and her teachers, the researcher, or even other people in the university environment. In the last one, dialogic negotiation is not apparent in the way as defined in the above sections, but mainly in the negotiation of textual features by the participant.

### *Variables related to L2 writing*

There is one crucial point to be taken into consideration in applying the dialogic metaphor to L2 writing including EFL writing; that is, we must take into account such critical variables claimed to influence L2 writing as those identified in recent studies (Hirose and Sasaki, 1994; Sasaki & Hirose, 1996). Such studies have revealed that L2 texts reflect complicated factors including L2 proficiency, L1 writing ability, metaknowledge about writing, and instructional background and writing experience. It is quite plausible that these variables affect dialogic negotiation of text and context in L2 writing as well. Accordingly, the present study seeks to deliberate these variables in relation to the EFL writer's dialogic negotiation process of text and contexts.

#### *L2 proficiency*

Obviously, one critical variable affecting L2 writing is L2 proficiency. It is quite probable that writers writing in L2 are under the strong influence of their L2 proficiency. However, there have

been mixed results concerning the influence of L2 proficiency on L2 writing quality. Such studies as Raimes (1985) and Zamel (1982) suggest that L2 writing may not be influenced by L2 proficiency on the ground that L2 writers write effectively or poorly regardless of their L2 linguistic proficiency. These researchers assume that L2 writing quality is dependent on L2 writer's composing competence rather than on L2 linguistic proficiency.

In the meantime, other researchers including Cumming (1989) and Pennington & So (1993) reported that L2 proficiency influences the quality of L2 writing. Besides, the recent studies (Hirose & Sasaki, 1994; Sasaki & Hirose 1996) revealed that L2 proficiency is the strongest explanatory variable for L2 writing ability. Some L2 writers are deemed to have much difficulty producing text representing what they intend to mean because of their limited grammatical and lexical ability. It is imaginable that those with difficulty producing linguistically appropriate text on the basis of which further text is produced will not be able to construct appropriate situational contexts. This might lead to poor writing as a result. Hence, it is imperative that L2 proficiency be examined as a factor influencing EFL writer's process of dialogic negotiation of L2 textual features in the proposed study.

#### *L1 writing ability*

Researchers have investigated the relationship between L1 writing ability and L2 writing ability. However, there have been mixed results here as well. For instance, Cumming (1989) suggests that writing ability transcends between L1 and L2, and Hirose & Sasaki (1996) reports that L1 writing ability is the second strongest

explanatory power affecting L2 writing. However, such studies as Carson, Carrell, Silberstein, Kroll, and Kuehn (1990) and Pennington & So (1993) did not find correlation between the two variables. Although the arguments regarding the relationship between the two seem to go on, it is necessary to include L1 writing ability in considering factors influencing dialogic negotiation of text and contexts as well because it is quite feasible that tracing the process of dialogic negotiation of text and contexts in the two languages may provide different research findings.

*Metaknowledge of L2 writing*

Metaknowledge of L2 writing is the third variable affecting L2 writing which Sasaki & Hirose (1996) identified in their research. They attempt to define metaknowledge of L1 writing as follows, citing Reid's (1990) following description about successful L2 writer's knowledge:

Second language writers who are successful writers in their first language often know what is socially and culturally appropriate in terms of the writers roles, audience expectations, rhetorical and stylistic conventions, and situational and contextual features of written text. (p. 201)

This knowledge as to what is expected in a given writing task is crucial for L2 writers (Raimes, 1985). Reid (1990), however, maintains that it is difficult to postulate that nonnative writers have such knowledge about conventions in the target language. It is this knowledge which needs to be acquired in the process of acquiring

writing skills in L2. Therefore, this variable must also be included as a critical factor in relation to dialogic negotiation in L2 writing.

*Educational background in writing*

Another variable which Sasaki & Hirose (1996) examined was learners' instructional backgrounds. With respect to this variable, Cumming's (1998) following description seems to provide a clear rationale for the investigation:

Second language writing takes on particular significance for students, teachers, curricula, and the overall educational contexts they function in. This significance is shaped by the conventions and demands of education as well as by individuals' past experiences, expectations, and local circumstances and discursive practices (p. 62).

Furthermore, regarding discursal organization of L2 composition displayed in students' compositions and teaching emphasis placed on a particular aspect of writing instruction, Mohan & Lo (1985) argue that the emphasis of English language instruction program, rather than a cultural preference for a certain style, can be the source of differences in the organization of essays. They also suggest that previous educational experience may facilitate or retard the development of academic writing ability, and that particular attention should be paid to students' previous educational experience when considering L2 writing. Concerning this point, Sasaki & Hirose (1996) also suggest that L2 writing ability may be concerned with certain types of L1 writing experiences. In view of these findings, it



seems quite meaningful to explore the relationships between learner's dialogic negotiation of text and contexts and their educational backgrounds in L1 and L2 writing.

*Text features to be explored in relation to dialogic perspective*

In order to provide some viewpoints in investigating textual features produced by EFL learners and dialogic negotiation of text and contexts, the premises discussed above will be summarized again. The first point is that text and contexts are inseparable in the meaning-making practice of the dialogic perspective, and that text transforms when put into new contexts, contributing to the construction of further new contexts. Secondly, writers are metaphorically negotiating with his intended audience, and this means each writer is actually negotiating with him/ herself through him/ her inner thought. Then, writer's text is guided by the conventions of the discourse community and the writer is a borrower of texts who constructs texts out of the community inter-text. Furthermore, such audience is defined as the discourse community which is further characterized as possessing at least one genre. Finally, shared genre knowledge between readers and writers plays a crucial role in communication, and that genre knowledge can reveal a lot about the audience as the discourse community.

Based on these premises, it is worthwhile to look at the following points concerning textual features to be observed in the EFL writers' writing processes: 1) what textual features are employed by writers in negotiating contexts; 2) do textual features and contexts interact with each other, while transforming each other; 3) how do

writers try to relate textual features to contextual resources; 4) what textual features do writers think represent the typical genre in their discourse community; 5) what kind of genre knowledge concerning textual features do writers display in negotiating contexts; and 6) what textual features are observed which seem to be influenced by their limited linguistic skills.

### *Summary and Evaluation of Previous Research*

As far as I have searched, the number of studies focusing on dialogic negotiation in ESL writing is quite limited, and it is quite difficult to make an evaluative comment on the previous studies.

However, the relative deficiency of studies dealing with this topic must be indicated first. This means, at the same time, that the present study could make a significant contribution by addressing this topic. Secondly, the definitions of such ambiguous concepts as 'dialogue' and 'negotiation' seem to be regarded as self-explanatory, and providing clear definitions for such critical concepts is mandatory. In the previous studies, dialogic interactions seem to be postulated between the participants in the educational environment, as in the form of collaborative discussions through electronic media or in the form of reader-writer relations artificially created for peer reading or peer correction of writer's text.

Furthermore, not a single study reviewed has addressed the dialogic negotiation assumed to take place within writers themselves, as in the form of dialogic negotiation between the 'narrator' in a novel and the 'author' of the novel, which originally appeared in Bakhtin's (1981) discussion of 'discourse in the novel.' (p. 314) It

seems to me that the dialogic negotiation of this level, rather than that of interlocutors (e.g. writers and readers) in collaborative discussions through electronic media, could reveal more about the dynamic nature of writing.

Besides, the situational and local aspect of dialogicality explained in the previous section has not been addressed sufficiently. Investigating how writers use immediate or prior text to construct contexts and then utilize the new contexts to produce further text could be a promising agenda.

Finally, none of the studies reviewed have addressed the issue of dialogic negotiation in ESL writing while systematically taking into account such critical variables of L2 writing. It is conceivable that L1 and L2 writers negotiate text and contexts differently and produce different products as the result of the influence of such critical factors. L2 writers could show a unique pattern of dialogic negotiation different from that of L1 writers.

### *Rationale for the Present Study*

The present study is a heuristic and inductive one, and it intends to make a descriptive model of how EFL writers negotiate contexts represented by audience readers while they are composing text. It also attempts to see if there are any relationships between writers' negotiation of contexts, textual features produced, text quality and factors claimed to influence L2 writing. Thus, the general research question is: How does the dialogic negotiation of text and contexts manifest itself for EFL writers? This general research

question will be addressed by finding answers to the following more specific research questions:

- 1) How do EFL learners use textual features and contextual resources in negotiating contexts?
- 2) Are there any correlations between EFL writer's negotiation of contexts and major variables affecting EFL writing?
- 3) How do EFL writers negotiate contexts under the influence of these major variables ?

*Rationale for the first research question*

Before providing a rationale for the first research question, I will introduce a discussion by Matsuda, et al. (2003, pp. 166-67) regarding the recent research trend in second language discourse studies toward which the present study is carried out, as in my brief summary below.

Recent L2 writing researchers attempt to situate discourse in the purposes, identities, and contexts within which it is constructed and which it helps construct. In this new perspective, L2 writers are assumed to be writing for a purpose, co-constructing their texts in an interactive and collaborative way with a particular target audience. Unlike the previous text analysis focusing on surface forms alone, the recent discourse analysis attempts to explore the actions for which these forms are used and to reveal the complex relations between texts and their contexts. In short, it tries to show how texts are related to their contexts. Thus, we are expected to clarify relationships

between discourse features and such issues as writer purpose, identity, audience expectations, cultural schemata, and disciplinary perceptions.

Their discussions above have provided me with a strong motivation to generate the first research question which covers the issues in the first part, the core part, of the entire project. Below are the rationales for the first research question, most of which are theoretical.

First of all, the present study tries to investigate how EFL writers utilize textual features in negotiating contexts, situating their text in authentic contexts where it is constructed. Unlike previous text analytic studies intending to investigate well-formedness of text, apart from contexts, this study will involve as much contextual information as possible and attempt to explore the relationship between text and contexts in EFL writing in the dialogic perspective, which is quite a unique approach to the discourse in second language writing.

It has been difficult to operationalize the fuzzy concept of contexts, but the clearly defined idea of contextual resources by Linell (1998) can be utilized as an effective tool to investigate the relationship between contexts and other factors concerning L2 writing. Thus, this study is expected to portray a clearer image of critical relationships between such factors.

Related to the second point above is the unique focus placed on contextual resources in considering contexts, which is the third point. Most previous studies done in the dialogic perspective,

including Matsuda (1997), seem to have focused on 'global' and 'cultural' contextual resources rather than 'situational' and 'local' resources in deliberating situated discourses. For example, dialogic negotiation in collaborative work between teachers and students in a longitudinal study involving a limited number of subjects may be influenced more by 'global' and 'cultural' resources in defining their contexts. However, focusing more on 'situational' and 'local' contextual resources could provide a different clue to delineating a clearer image of the truly 'dynamic' nature of meaning construction. Thus, the present study is a challenge to portray a dynamic view of dialogic negotiation in EFL writing, emphasizing more on the latter aspects of contextual features.

With regard to the relationship between text and contexts, Matsuda suggests that 'not enough empirical evidence exists to help define the relationship between text and context --- " (ibid., p. 251). This study could provide some empirical evidence for this point, which is another contribution this study could make.

The fifth probable contribution of the present study is that it could shed a new light on our way of looking at 'dialogic negotiation in writing.' Previous studies have postulated dialogic negotiations taking place between writers and peer readers, teachers and students in the actual educational environment, but not many studies have addressed dialogic negotiation taking place in writer's inner thought, i.e., the one taking place between writers and their fictitious audience readers, i.e., their own selves. As Roth (1987) indicates, the image of their audience tends to vary in the process of composing because text and contexts are always interacting and renewing each other.

The current study could provide empirical evidence for this fact in carefully analyzing what is going on in writer's negotiation of audience in his inner thought.

Then, this study tries to explore EFL writers' dialogic negotiation of text and contexts in relation to their genre knowledge as well. The discourse community as audience is defined as the community possessing a genre, and thus, it is obvious that the genre knowledge plays a crucial role when a writer composes. Contextual resources overlap some of the items of the genre knowledge delineated by Jones (1997), but investigating the issue from the perspective of genre knowledge may produce another unique result in elucidating dialogic negotiation of contexts.

Furthermore, the results to be obtained from this study could generate suggestions for writers negotiating text and contexts in the foreign language environment, not in the second language environment. There are problems intrinsic to writing in the foreign language environment where it is quite difficult for learners to write in the authentic genre, as opposed to the second language environment where there are full of authentic genres and writers can produce text in meaningful contexts. Here I could make another contribution to exploring the relationship between learners' environment and the dialogic negotiation.

#### *Rationale for the second research question*

For the second part of the investigation dealing with correlations between text, contextual resources and major variables affecting EFL writing, I can raise the following point to show the

significance of the research question; that is, the present study as a correlational study investigating textual features, contextual resources and critical variables influencing second language writing. Previous studies have explored the relationships between text quality and critical variables such as L2 proficiency, L1 writing ability, metaknowledge on compositions, and educational background in writing. However, these variables could be categorized as some of the contextual resources in Linell's dialogic perspective. Thus, it would be challenging to investigate whether or not there are any correlations not only between text quality and these variables but also between textual features, these highly influential contextual resources (i.e., critical variables), and other contextual resources to be employed in establishing contexts in the dialogic negotiation in L2 writing. Correlations between such factors, if found, could be utilized in generating further research questions for future studies.

#### *Rationale for the third research question*

Finally, the third research question deals with the synthesis of findings in the first part on the dialogic negotiation of text and contexts and those in the second part exploring correlations between the critical variables and the dialogic negotiation in L2 writing. Without taking into account the special conditions for L2 writing to be explored in the second part of the investigation, the description of the dialogic negotiation in EFL writing cannot be complete. The third research question is intended to address this point.



### *Other possible contributions*

Pedagogically speaking, this description of dialogic negotiation could provide second language teachers and learners with a model to understand how they are writing while negotiating textual features and contexts under the influence of critical variables. Through comparing their own ways of negotiating contexts with those of effective writers to be portrayed in the present study, they could be motivated to improve their ways of negotiation and thus enhance the quality of composition as a result. At the same time, it could provide EFL composition teachers with an opportunity to reconsider the importance of training EFL writers in authentic contexts and genres.

Methodologically speaking, this study will be the first in the area of EFL writing studies which utilizes the methodological triangulation of the concurrent think-aloud protocol, text analysis, and correlation analysis of critical variables concerning L2 writing to elucidate the phenomenon of dialogic negotiation of text and contexts.

## Methods

This section describes the research method and data analysis procedure for the current study. First, it will provide the guiding epistemology of the study on which the entire research design is established. Then, the methods and data analysis procedure to be employed will be discussed for the following three components of the investigating part of the entire project: 1) process tracing; 2) correlation analysis between variables in ESL writing, and 3)

synthesis of data to build a descriptive model.

### *Design of the Present Study*

The primary research design of the present study comprises three parts: 1) the preparatory part of generating research questions; 2) the investigation part of data collection and analysis, and 3) the follow-up stage of critical review or revisit of the entire research. The three parts of the data collection and analysis are: 1) process-tracing of ten EFL students writing in the authentic genre in their discourse community; 2) correlational analysis between text, contextual resources and major variables affecting EFL writing; 3) synthesizing results from the two sources above and making a descriptive model of how EFL writers negotiate contexts utilizing textual features under the influence of critical variables in L2 writing.

### *Guiding epistemology*

The present study is a synthetic and heuristic inquiry which intends to make a descriptive model of how EFL writers negotiate text and contexts in the dialogic perspective. In this section, I will attempt to situate the proposed study among a variety of second language research, using the four parameters provided by Seliger and Shohamy (1989) and the conditions required of the present study.

The first parameter is concerned with how we approach research questions: synthetic or analytic. An approach to phenomena allowing us to view the separate parts as a coherent whole is labeled as 'synthetic' or 'holistic' approach, as opposed to an 'analytic'

approach which tries to identify and investigate one or some factors of one major system. This study takes the former stance, in that it attempts to describe what dialogic negotiation in EFL writing is, through combining what will be made clear concerning textual features with what will be elucidated in terms of contextual resources and of critical variables concerning L2 writing, and then synthesizing these findings to make a descriptive model as to the phenomenon of dialogic negotiation of text and contexts in EFL writing as a whole.

The second parameter relates to the overall objective or purpose of the research: heuristic (inductive) or deductive. When the aim of the research is heuristic, the investigator observes and records some aspect or context of second language so that he can describe what happens or generate hypotheses about the phenomenon investigated. In this type of data-driven study, researchers collect data, usually with no preconceptions, together with the contextual information, then categorize and analyze the data to describe the phenomenon. Such research with a heuristic objective makes it possible for us to discover patterns, behaviors, explanations, and to form questions or hypotheses for further research. The present study can be categorized into this type of heuristic research rather than deductive, hypothesis-testing one, because it intends to describe patterns to be observed in EFL writer's negotiation of text and contexts, on the basis of the written text produced in situations with fewer constraints and the information about contextual resources which is to be obtained from writers' concurrent think-aloud protocols. These two parameters are applicable to the conceptual level of research, but the following two parameters to the operational

level.

The third parameter is concerned with the control and manipulation of the research context. Usually, synthetic research including this study should be conducted in situations with little control, manipulation, or restriction on the research context, and the interpretive ability of the researcher plays a crucial role because it is the researcher who decides what will be recorded or what will be discarded, and it is also the researcher who provides categories into which the collected data is put.

Finally, the fourth parameter, which manifests the concrete relationship between the conceptual and the operational level, concerns the explicitness or specificity of the data and the data collection procedures. This is because the approach, objective, and design of the research will be expressed in what data will be regarded as important and the manner in which those data will be collected and analyzed. The present study will utilize data to be collected in a situation where naturally occurring phenomena of dialogic negotiation in EFL writing are observable through a data collection procedure with low explicitness.

The research design and data analysis procedure for the present study will be guided by the epistemology above, and thus, the major parts of the research design and data analysis will be determined almost automatically. In the section that follows, I will delineate the primary research design of the present study.

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