Second Language Composition in Independent Settings: Using Classroom-Assessment Techniques as a Self-instructional Tool

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Introduction

Developing learner autonomy is perhaps the most delicate and important aspect of learning a language at a distance or in an independent setting (Moore; Vanijdee; White). However, the existence of a self-instructional context does not necessarily ensure that a learner is automatically cognizant of his or her dual role as both a learner and a manager of the learning process. Instead, learners must actively employ various strategies, cognitive, metacognitive, and socio-affective, in order to navigate the independent setting and monitor their learning. They must maintain an awareness of their new choices and responsibilities. Indeed, distance and independent environments present new opportunities and demands that require that the learner be involved to a much greater extent in both self- and environment management (White). In other words, the successful independent learner must acquire "new kinds of skills, motivation, and commitment" (White). Additionally, the successful independent learner must cultivate a "positive opinion and attitude toward learning, be self-reliant, employ self-management skills and be persistent" (Vanijdee 80).

Language instructors, on the other hand, must provide independent learners with the "means to manage their independent learning experiences, to organize, monitor and reflect on their learning and make decisions" (White 4). A new responsibility for language learners seems to be to provide strategy development opportunities and learner training in the independent setting, a job that is equally as vital to student success as the standard responsibility of preparing content lessons to be carried out in the traditional classroom. Teachers involved with distance and independent L2 writers will have an increasing obligation to teach students how to manage their writing process.

Although many aspects of language learning can be addressed in independent learning settings, it remains that writing lends itself most naturally to individual practice. Whereas speaking and listening, for example, normally occur "in the company of one or more individuals, writing is usually a solitary activity. Students can complete written tasks by themselves" (Chastain 248). This article, therefore, focuses on second language writing in independent settings and offers various strategies, cognitive, metacognitive, and managerial, that can be used to support the independent learning process and maximize self-efficacy in students' performance. The majority of the strategies and techniques presented here are classroom assessment techniques (CATs) that have been either modified for, or simply applied to, the independent writing context.

Second Language Writing

Few, if any, language educators would disagree with the observation that second language writing instruction has evolved from one possessing a static product orientation, to one that emphasizes writing as a dynamic, non-linear, recursive process. The writing process encompasses a view of writing as the mental processes it involves and defines writing as a series of steps (pre-writing, writing, reviewing, and rewriting) involving multiple drafts. It emphasizes the act of writing, rather than just the outcome. According to Flower and Hayes, writing is a complex, recursive cognitive process involving the

writer's long-term memory, where knowledge of the topic, audience, and writing plans are stored, the task environment, including the rhetorical problem and the text produced so far, and writing subprocesses such as idea-generation, goal-setting, organizing, reviewing, evaluating, and revising. The writing process is therefore "quite cognitively complex as writers move their thoughts back and forth between [stages and] components, always returning to and redefining their higher goals" (Barnett 35).

Because many second language (L2) students are overly concerned with producing accurate surface-level features, such as grammar and vocabulary, and thus, tend to focus on the end product, rather than the writing process, Scott offers thirteen suggestions for L2 writing instructors that can inform the independent writing environment, as well as the traditional classroom context. The following simple suggestions, although directed toward the teacher/facilitator, are designed to help students view writing as a nonlinear process.

1. Teach about the writing process;
2. Discuss the first language writing process (students may not be aware of what they do while writing in their first language);
3. Emphasize writing as discovery;
4. Provide a new perspective on grammar and writing (grammar and vocabulary are simply vehicles for meaning);
5. Redefine 'creative' writing (all writing is created by the author);
6. Design writing assignments that engage students in the writing process;
7. Encourage consideration of the intended audience, (include assignments with a natural audience, such as writing letters or newspaper articles);
8. Assess the time necessary to complete the writing task;
9. Teach effective strategies for generating ideas;
10. Address the issue of translation (translating ideas and images into text versus translating text from one language into another);
11. Teach students to revise;
12. Develop an awareness of a monitor;
13. Include a writing conference in the instructional approach (Scott)

Although written for the traditional L2 writing instructor, these suggestions can be employed by instructors working with students in distance education, or when preparing materials for use in independent settings. Scott also offers two questionnaires that can easily be adapted for use in distance and independent settings. These questionnaires help the student-writer focus on writing as a process by prompting him or her to consider steps and habits when writing in both the first and second languages. In figure 1 below, Scott's (1996, 46) first questionnaire deals with writing in a native language:

Figure 1
Writing Process Questionnaire
When writing in your native language…

1. Do you get your ideas more from thinking, reading, or discussing? Explain:
2. Do your ideas take the shape of images or words? Explain:
3. Do new and different ideas come to you before or during writing? Explain:
4. Do you make a formal outline before beginning to write? Explain:
5. Do you reread your work while writing? Explain:
6. Do you imagine who your audience is? Explain:

7. Do you revise or change your work? Explain:
8. Do you prefer writing with pencil and paper or with a computer? Explain:

The second questionnaire outlines questions for students who are writing in a foreign language (47):

Figure 2

Foreign Language Writing Process Questionnaire

When writing in a foreign language…

1. Do you write down your ideas in your first language or your second language? Explain:
2. Do you use your textbook while you are writing? Explain:
3. Do you use a grammar reference while you are writing? Explain:
4. Do you use a dictionary while you are writing? Explain:
5. Do you translate from your first language into the foreign language while you write? Explain:
6. Do you revise and correct grammatical errors? Explain:
7. Do you revise ideas and content? Explain:

Asking students to take a moment to reflect on what they do while they write in a first and second language, either through a simple questionnaire, such as those in Figures 1 and 2, or through the CATs presented later in this chapter, can potentially encourage the independent writer to focus on the writing process, rather than on the final product alone. Clearly, writing involves an intricate set of steps and choices. However, because the typical student writer tends to focus on the final product, he or she "is not always aware of the strategies that they use for either first or second language writing" (Scott 31).

Language Learning Strategies

In addition to moving the students' focus away from the form-focused product to the recursive process of writing, students in general, and independent learners in particular, must be made aware of and armed with appropriate language-learning strategies. Language-learning strategies are specific behaviors or "attacks" consciously chosen by the learner in order to improve language learning and use of the target language. According to Olivares-Cuhat, direct strategies (memory, cognitive, and compensatory strategies) require a straightforward involvement with the target language. Indirect strategies (metacognitive, affective, and social strategies) facilitate and orchestrate the learning process without direct involvement of the target language.

Memory strategies assist students in storing and retrieving new information and include placing new words in context or using key words to prompt the identification of meanings. Cognitive strategies help students comprehend and produce language. They include summarizing, translating, and taking notes. Compensation strategies help students use language in spite of gaps in their knowledge and can include using linguistic cues for guessing, coining words, and using synonyms. Metacognitive strategies direct the acquisition of knowledge through self-monitoring, evaluating, or identifying the purpose of a language task. Affective strategies encourage student motivation and can include using relaxation techniques and making positive statements. Finally, social strategies promote learner interaction with other participants through actions such as asking for feedback or engaging in peer-editing.

McKeachie and his colleagues describe the same concepts, but use slightly different terms. For McKeachie et al., student cognition and learning strategies deal with

how students acquire and modify their knowledge. Under this rubric, skills are arranged in three broad categories: cognitive, metacognitive, and resource management. Cognitive strategies facilitate the encoding and retrieval of information. Metacognitive strategies relate to planning, regulating, monitoring, and modifying cognitive processes. And resource management strategies control the resources that influence the quality and quantity of involvement in a task such as time, effort, and outside support (Angelo and Cross 117). If "active engagement in higher learning implies and requires self-awareness and self-direction" (225), as well as the effective use of cognitive, metacognitive and resource management strategies, then nowhere is instruction in the use of these skills and strategies more important than in the independent setting, where awareness and knowledge of the self as a learner, along with conscious self-control and self-regulation, are essential for successful learner-autonomy (Vanijdee; White).

Classroom-Assessment Techniques as Strategies to Support Independent L2 Writing

Classroom-assessment techniques, or CATs, are simple techniques used to collect data on student learning with an ultimate aim of improving it. Simply put, they are feedback-gathering devices. CATs "give teachers information to navigate by, feedback to guide the continual small adjustments and corrections needed to keep student learning on course" (Angelo and Cross 26). Indeed, educational assessment is neither unidirectional nor a one-time event; it is a "dynamic, cyclical process through which instructors receive feedback from students and 'close the feedback loop' by communicating the results to students, making instructional adjustments if necessary, and then reassessing (Angelo and Cross 6). The typical CAT, however, is flexible and adaptable so that it can be made to fit the needs of different teachers, students, subjects, and learning environments, including independent language-learning settings. And, rather than just informing and empowering the instructor to make curriculum changes, many CATs can be modified to "help students examine their own language development and can assist [students] in prioritizing goals and evaluating the effectiveness of instructional techniques" (Carduner 543). In fact, many regular users of CATs have found that such techniques encourage reflective practice on the part of the student and can potentially raise the students' metacognitive awareness of the learning process (Angelo and Cross; Carduner; Cross; Steadman; Steadman and Svinicki). In addition, CATs have been found to help students develop learning strategies, such as brainstorming, rehearsing, organizing knowledge, identifying main ideas, and elaborating and making connections (Carduner; Steadman; Steadman and Svinicki).

Carduner, for example, applied several CATs to a traditional post-secondary Spanish composition course with the aim of helping students use writing reference tools to improve accuracy, rather than simply assessing student performance. To this end, she employed the Background Knowledge Probe (BKP), the Teacher-Designated Feedback Form (TDFF), and the Minute Paper. BKPs are used to access student background knowledge and direct students' attention toward the most important material about to be presented in class. When applied to L2 compositions, BKPs can be used to activate student content knowledge about an upcoming composition topic. Similarly, Teacher-Designated Feedback Forms are traditionally used to elicit focused student responses to questions concerning the effectiveness of a lesson, but can also be used to query students about their composition habits, such as "Do you proofread your writing for agreement?"

or "Do you use a bilingual dictionary while composing?" Minute Papers are typically used to assess a lesson by reserving a few minutes at the end of a class period and asking students to answer one or two questions like the following: "What was the most important thing you learned during class?" or "What important question remains unanswered?" Instructors usually ask students to respond anonymously on notecards, which are then collected and reviewed by the instructor. In addition to the BKP and TDFF, Carduner asked her Spanish students to compose Minute Papers on questions related to L2 writing such as "Is there anything that you still do not understand about using accent marks?" She found that CATs were a useful mechanism for reinforcing strategy use and that strategy use correlated positively and significantly with writing achievement.

Just as general CATs can be adapted to fit the L2 writing classroom, so too can they be applied to the independent learner in general, and to the independent L2 writer in particular. Indeed, by placing the CAT tool into the hands of the learner, rather than the instructor, students can become more successful managers of their own learning. Because CATs require learners to engage in metacognition and to reflect upon and to assess their own learning or language production, students can become more aware, more efficient, and more effective independent L2 learners.

A Reapplication of CATs

In their 1993 handbook for college teachers, *Classroom Assessment Techniques*, Angelo and Cross describe fifty CATs that can be used to assess student learning and to provide feedback in post-secondary courses of study ranging from Accounting to Zoology. The remainder of this chapter presents twelve of the original fifty CATs that are readily adaptable from being a teacher-centered mechanism to a student-centered tool, and that are particularly applicable to the independent L2 writing environment.

1. Background Knowledge Probe (BKP). As discussed earlier, the BKP typically takes the shape of a short questionnaire prepared by the instructor to be used at the beginning of a course or at the start of a new lesson or topic. BKPs may ask students to write short answers, circle a response, or respond in a multiple-choice format. BKPs "probe students' existing knowledge of [a given] concept, subject, or topic" (123). As applied to the independent L2 writer, however, BKPs can be written by the student-writer, or by a remote teacher/tutor. Once a writer has selected a composition topic, he or she can prepare and subsequently answer his or her own questions on that topic as a pre-writing exercise. Or, in a distance-learning environment, the instructor can prepare a short set of questions for the writer on the pre-determined topic in order to 'prime the pump' of background knowledge, experience, and ideas.

2. Focused Listing. Focused Lists are generally used to assess what learners recall as the most important points related to a given topic or lecture. In addition to providing assessment data to the instructor, this technique is also used to help students focus their attention and improve recall. Angelo and Cross outline the following steps for its implementation. First, select an important topic or concept and describe it in a brief phrase. Second, write that word or phrase at the top of a sheet of paper as the heading for a Focused List of related terms important to understanding that topic. Third, set a time limit. Fourth, make a list of important words and phrases that you can recall that are related to your heading. (129).

Focused Listing can very easily be used by the independent L2 writer as a pre-writing brainstorming activity by stimulating the writer to recall what he or she already knows about a topic before beginning the writing process.

3. Pro and Con Grids. The Pro and Con Grid asks learners to write down a quick list of pros and cons for a topic or issue in order to help the learner to think more clearly before making a decision. This CAT asks teachers to take the following steps. First, focus on a decision, judgment, dilemma, or issue. Second, write a prompt that will elicit thoughtful pros and cons from the students. Next, give an expectation as to how many of each (pros and cons) should be produced. Finally, examine the balance of the two sides (170). This technique can be used by the independent L2 student before engaging in a position paper or any argumentative mode of composition. Before identifying their own issue or topic and listing the pros and cons, the independent writer will likely still need guidelines as to how many pros and cons are expected, and should also be encouraged to review and reflect upon the outcome, or the balance, of the exercise before beginning.

4. One-Sentence Summary. The One-Sentence Summary asks students to answer the questions "Who does what to whom, when, where, how, and why?" about a topic and then to synthesize these answers within the constraints of a single informative, grammatical, and potentially lengthy sentence. For the independent L2 writer, this technique can be used as a pre-writing, yet post-brainstorming activity. The One-Sentence Summary can be used to organize the sometimes chaotic information produced by idea generation or exploration.

5. The Word Journal. The Word Journal prompts a two-part response from students. First, the student is asked to summarize a short text into a single word. Next, he or she writes a paragraph explaining why that particular word was chosen. The end result is a synopsis of the focus of the text. Angelo and Cross (1993) maintain that the Word Journal helps with students' ability to write highly condensed abstracts and 'chunk' large amounts of information. It also helps develop students' skills in explaining and defending (188). In addition to an assessment of text comprehension, it can also be used by the independent L2 writer during rewrite stages of the composition process. For example, once a draft is completed, the L2 writer can apply the Word Journal technique to his or her own text. The resulting abstract can be reviewed by the writer before engaging in subsequent drafts.

6. Concept Maps. Concept Maps are drawings or diagrams showing the mental connections that students make focusing on a major concept and making connections to others. Angelo and Cross offer the analogy of asking students to draw a map of the area within a 20 mile radius around the city of Boston, putting in only the features that they regard as most important. This technique provides an "observable and assessable record of the students' conceptual schemata—the patterns of association that they make in relation to a given task" (197). In other words, it helps students uncover the "web of relationships" (197) for a topic and gives them more control over their connection making ability. Engaging in concept mapping encourages students to examine conceptual networks and, if need be, make explicit changes to them. The steps to this CAT are as follows. First, select the target concept or topic. Second, brainstorm for a few minutes, writing down terms and short phrases closely related to the stimulus. Third, draw

a Concept Map based on the brainstorming outcomes, placing the stimulus at the center and drawing lines to the other concepts. For example, a Concept Map could resemble a wheel and its spokes, with the focus concept at the hub. Or, it could be based on a model of the solar system, with the stimulus in the sun's position. Fourth, determine the ways in which the various concepts are related to each other and indicate these relationships on the lines connecting the concepts (200). In addition to a self-assessment technique, the Concept Map can also serve as an excellent independent pre-writing activity by prompting writers to consider how their own "ideas and concepts are related, as well as realize that associations are changeable" (201). This last point is particularly important when encouraging successful revisions and prompting students to view their writing as an evolution, rather than an artifact.

7. Student-Generated Test Questions. As an assessment technique, Student-Generated Test Questions demonstrate what students consider to be the most important content of a lesson, lecture, or reading, what they believe to be fair and useful test questions, and how well they can answer questions they have developed. Similar to the Word Journal, Student-Generated Test Questions can be used by the independent L2 writer during rewrite stages of the composition process. After completing a first draft, the independent writer can be encouraged to reread his or her text to-date and generate several questions that could be used to assess an external reader's comprehension of that passage. The resulting focused and critical rereading, with the goal of preparing 'test' questions, rather than immediate revision, can give writers a unique perspective of their own text and promote more meaningful revisions during subsequent drafts.

8. The Paper or Project Prospectus. The Paper Prospectus, in this case, "prompts students to think through elements of an assignment such as the topic, purpose, intended audience, major questions to be answered, basic organization, and time and resources required" (Angelo and Cross 248). The nature of this CAT requires no modification for the independent L2 writing setting. Figure 3 below illustrates the use of the Paper Prospectus.

Figure 3

The Paper Prospectus

Directions: The prompts listed below are meant to help you get started on your paper. Respond to each prompt with a brief but well-thought-out answer. Remember that this prospectus is only a plan. You will most likely have to revise part of or perhaps all of your original plan as you go through the composition process. So, make your best predictions and plans as you answer, but don't be surprised or concerned if you make changes as you proceed.

Proposed title:

Purpose (What will this paper do for the reader? For you?):

Major questions(s) you hope to answer:

Work calendar (How will you spread the work out? When will you do it?):

Proposed table of contents/List of major sections:

Help/Resources needed (What do you need in order to do a good job?):

Your biggest concern(s) or question(s) about the paper:

9. Course-Related Self-Confidence Surveys. The Course-Related Self-Confidence Survey is a rough measure of students' self-confidence concerning a given skill or ability. Typically, to administer this CAT, the instructor prepares a set of questions or a brief survey designed to assess students' self-confidence before engaging them in a new activity or introducing a new concept. For the independent L2 writer, however, the Course-Related Self-Confidence Survey can be used as a support strategy to help the writer navigate the independent setting and manage his or her autonomy. Weinstein and Mayer believe that students, and independent students especially, need support strategies in order to create and maintain a climate conducive to learning. Although this particular CAT cannot be created by the student, a set of questions related to independent writing or to the L2 writing process can be prepared externally in advance and administered to the independent L2 learner. Indeed, students can be encouraged to "take control of their learning environments through monitoring, anxiety reduction [and] self-regulation" (Angelo and Cross 256).

10. Self-Assessment of Ways of Learning. Similar to the Course-Related Self-Confidence Survey, the Self-Assessment of Ways of Learning is a CAT that can be administered to students in independent settings to raise their awareness of how they approach a learning task, such as writing, and provide information to help them mange and monitor their own success. This self-assessment tool asks students to describe their general approaches to learning, and their learning styles, by comparing themselves to a previously prepared set of learning profiles and then selecting those that they believe most closely resemble their own style. This particular CAT requires a significant amount of time and attention to develop, but is readily administered via distance and can be reapplied to multiple courses and contexts.

11. Productive Study-Time Logs. The Productive Study-Time Log is a thumbnail record "that students keep on how much time they spend studying for a particular class, when they study, and how productively they study at various times of the day or night" (Angelo and Cross 300). This technique helps students examine and consider how much time they spend studying (versus how much time they might think they do), as well as which times of the day or night yield the greatest returns on their investment. Armed with this information, the learner can make informed decisions concerning when, where, and how long he or she should study. Angelo and Cross recommend that the student record when, where, and how he or she studies for several days or weeks at a time, then look for days of the week and times when studying occurs and when the most productive studying takes place. The student should also look for patterns linking studying to certain locations with higher or lower productivity. Given this information, students have a better chance of making productive changes to their study routines. For the independent learner or writer, this information is exceptionally useful, given that many independent contexts offer the student a great deal of latitude in terms of when, where, and how much studying (or writing) takes place.

12. Process Analysis. The Process Analysis technique examines how students engage in their academic work. It asks students to keep records of the steps taken while completing an assignment and then asks them to comment on these steps,

culminating in a self-assessment of their approach to a given task. It is intended to help students identify problems in their own methodology. By explicitly "breaking down the work process into distinct steps, Process Analysis allows students to tinker with and improve those steps and consequently make the whole process more effective" (Angelo and Cross 309). Given the recursive and dynamic nature of writing, it is a process readily available for detailed analysis by the independent L2 writer. In fact, Scott also recommends that writers analyze and understand the processes they employ while composing in both their native and their second languages (see Figures 1 and 2 for questionnaires).

Conclusion

In addition to providing educators with assessment data that is intended to inform and improve student learning, CATs can also be used to help students become "more actively interested in the process of learning itself" (Angelo and Cross 373). They can help the student become both aware of and active in his or her own learning by facilitating the following:

goal-setting (understanding or deciding why something needs to be learned and setting the standard by which progress will be measured); comprehension monitoring (recognizing when one isn't learning and why); strategy selection (being able to select from an array of learning strategies those most likely to achieve the goal); and resource management (being aware of and able to bring a wide range of resources into play achieving the goal) (Cross 14).

Putting CATs into the hands of the independent learner empowers him or her to assess the L2 composition process, encourages him or her to engage in pre-writing and idea generation, and poises him or her to employ composition strategies commonly associated with good writers, such as planning, rescanning, and revising. According to Scott (2), good writers take sufficient time to plan what they are going to write, which leads them to be more flexible and willing to modify the original plan. They also rescan, or pause frequently to reread while they are composing. And, as they revise, good writers make changes in content as well as in form.

The twelve CATs presented above can potentially, in the hands of the independent L2 writer, help him or her to plan (using Background Knowledge Probe, Focused Listing, Pro and Con Grid, Concept Maps, Paper-Prospectus), rescan (employing One-Sentence Summary, Word Journal), and revise (completing Student-Generated Test Questions, One-Sentence Summary, Word Journal, Focused Lists, Process Analysis). CATs can also help students become aware of the nature of writing as discovery, both discovery of content and discovery of self (using Course-Related Self-Confidence Surveys, Self-Assessment of Ways of Learning, Productive Study-Time Logs, and Process Analysis). The dynamic aspects of collecting, connecting, writing, and reading can be supported by CATs as well in many of the same ways: collecting (Background Knowledge Probe, Focused Lists); connecting (Pro and Con Grids, Concept Maps); writing (Paper Prospectus, Study-Time Logs, Process Analysis); and reading (Word Journal, Student-Generated Test Questions, and the One-Sentence Summary).

Weinstein and Mayer recommend that the independent learner activate four types of knowledge: 1) self-knowledge, including an understanding of one's own learning

preferences, abilities, and cognitive style; 2) knowledge of the learning task; 3) knowledge of prior understanding; and 4) knowledge of strategies and techniques appropriate for the setting, the learner, and the task. These types of knowledge and strategies "help make students more active participants in their own learning and [can] give them more control over their learning" (Angelo and Cross 256). The CATs and surveys reviewed above can be used to inform the independent L2 writer, rather than being reserved for the traditional classroom instructor for whom they were originally intended. Equipped with the knowledge and insights produced by these tools, the independent L2 writer can better understand, assess, and subsequently improve his or her learning and writing processes, and thus become a more successful, autonomous second language learner.

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