

The Importance of Writing in Language Acquisition: A Cognitive, Communicative, and Pedagogical Perspective

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Abstract:

Writing is a fundamental component of second language acquisition (SLA), enhancing learners' ability to internalize grammatical structures, expand vocabulary and engage in deeper language processing. Despite the emphasis on speaking and listening in communicative approaches, writing supports metalinguistic awareness and long-term retention. This article explores the cognitive and pedagogical functions of writing in language learning through a review of key theories and classroom-based evidence. A mixed-methods study involving literature analysis, classroom observations and learner surveys supports the conclusion that writing significantly contributes to comprehensive language development. This article seeks to explore and affirm the centrality of writing in the process of language acquisition. It draws on theoretical models, empirical studies and classroom observations to argue that writing is not only an outcome of language learning but also a driver of it. By highlighting the cognitive, pedagogical and social dimensions of writing, this article aims to contribute to a more balanced and integrated understanding of language acquisition and offer practical insights for educators, curriculum designers and language learners alike. This article investigates the significance of writing in SLA and presents evidence supporting its integration into language pedagogy.

Keywords

language acquisition, writing, second language learning, ESL, metalinguistic awareness, SLA, literacy, communicative competence

Introduction

Language acquisition is a multidimensional process that encompasses the development of receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing). Among these, writing often receives less emphasis in language learning curricula, particularly in communicative approaches that prioritize oral fluency. However, recent research and pedagogical trends suggest that writing plays a crucial, multifaceted role in both first and second language acquisition (SLA). Writing is not merely a means of expressing ideas; it is a cognitive and linguistic tool that facilitates deeper engagement with the language and supports the internalization of its structures.

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Historically, the development of writing skills has been perceived as secondary to speaking in SLA classrooms, often introduced at more advanced stages of proficiency. This view is rooted in the assumption that oral language is more fundamental and natural, while writing is an artificial construct. Yet, writing offers learners unique opportunities to reflect, organize and restructure their linguistic knowledge. Unlike speaking, which is often spontaneous and ephemeral, writing allows for deliberate planning, editing and revising, processes that are deeply conducive to metalinguistic awareness—an essential factor in mastering a new language (Hyland, 2003; Ferris, 2002).

In cognitive terms, writing is a generative activity that forces learners to process language at multiple levels. As they write, learners engage in lexical selection, syntactic structuring and semantic encoding, all while keeping audience, purpose and coherence in mind. This complex interplay of processes enhances not only grammatical competence but also pragmatic and discourse competence. Furthermore, studies show that writing reinforces vocabulary acquisition and improves retention by requiring learners to use new lexical items contextually and meaningfully (Nation, 2001; Webb, 2005). The act of producing written text solidifies knowledge in ways that passive exposure cannot.

From a sociocultural perspective, writing functions as a tool for interaction, negotiation of meaning and identity construction. According to Vygotsky theory, writing is a mediated activity that connects learners with social and cultural tools of language (Vygotsky, 1978). In classroom settings, writing tasks such as collaborative compositions, peer reviews and digital blogging foster authentic communication and allow learners to co-construct meaning with others. These practices not only develop linguistic skills but also promote learner autonomy and motivation.

Moreover, the rise of digital technology has transformed the nature of writing in language learning. Learners now have access to blogs, wikis, forums and other platforms that make writing more dynamic, interactive and immediate. These environments facilitate feedback, collaboration and engagement with global audiences, thus expanding the functional and communicative value of writing (Hyland, 2003). Writing is no longer confined to static, academic forms but has become a vibrant and socially meaningful act in the digital age.

Despite its documented benefits, writing is still underutilized in many SLA classrooms, often relegated to a peripheral role or treated as an assessment tool rather than a learning process. There is a pressing need to reevaluate the role of writing in language pedagogy, especially given the increasing demand for learners to demonstrate written proficiency in academic, professional and intercultural contexts.

Language acquisition involves mastering various modalities—listening, speaking, reading and writing. Among these, writing is often underutilized in language instruction, despite its essential role in reinforcing linguistic elements and supporting cognitive processing (Hyland, 2003). Writing not only promotes active language production but also offers learners the chance to review and revise their output, thereby enhancing accuracy and awareness of language structure.

1. Theoretical Foundations

Writing's role in SLA is supported by several foundational theories. Krashen's (1982) "Input Hypothesis" emphasizes the necessity of comprehensible input for language learning, yet Swain (1985) argues that output, particularly written output, pushes learners to process language more deeply, notice gaps in their competence and test linguistic hypotheses. Writing, therefore, serves as an essential complement to input-based learning.

Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory highlights writing as a mediated activity through which learners construct meaning, particularly when supported by scaffolding and social interaction. Writing helps bridge the gap between external input and internalization.

The importance of writing in language acquisition is underpinned by several influential theories from the fields of linguistics, cognitive psychology and sociocultural education. These theoretical foundations provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how writing contributes not only to the development of linguistic competence but also to cognitive processing, social interaction and learner autonomy. Central among these theories are the Output Hypothesis, Sociocultural Theory and Noticing Hypothesis, all of which highlight the unique role writing plays in facilitating language development.

One of the most widely cited theories in support of writing is Swain's Output Hypothesis (1985), which argues that language production—particularly in the form of written output—is essential for second language acquisition. While input (listening and reading) is critical, output forces learners to process language more deeply by constructing meaningful sentences, selecting appropriate vocabulary and applying grammatical rules. Writing, as a form of "pushed output," compels learners to go beyond their current level of competence, identify linguistic gaps and seek out new forms to express intended meanings. This process not only consolidates prior knowledge but also facilitates inter-language development by pushing learners to restructure their linguistic systems.

In parallel, Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990) suggests that learners must consciously notice language features in order for acquisition to occur. Writing supports this process by offering learners the time and space to attend to linguistic form—something that often eludes them during the rapid pace of spoken communication. When engaged in writing, learners are more likely to reflect on sentence structure, verb tense, article usage and vocabulary choice. This metalinguistic reflection fosters awareness of both correct and incorrect forms, allowing learners to internalize new structures more effectively (Swain, 1995; Schmidt, 2001).

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) also provides a powerful foundation for understanding the role of writing in language development. From this perspective, language learning is a socially mediated process that occurs through interaction, scaffolding and the use of cultural tools. Writing is one such tool, enabling learners to externalize their thoughts and engage with others in meaning-making activities. Collaborative writing tasks, peer feedback and teacher-guided revisions all

represent opportunities for learners to operate within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where they can achieve more with guidance than alone. In this way, writing serves both a cognitive and social function, facilitating language development through interaction and reflection.

Additionally, Cognitive Process Theory of Writing (Flower & Hayes, 1981) highlights writing as a recursive process involving planning, translating and revising. This model is particularly relevant to SLA, as each phase activates specific linguistic and cognitive demands. Planning requires idea generation and vocabulary access, translating involves syntactic construction and discourse organization and revising allows for the evaluation of linguistic accuracy and coherence. These stages align closely with the needs of language learners, who benefit from opportunities to process language deeply and iteratively.

Finally, constructivist learning theories emphasize the role of learners as active participants in their own learning. Writing, especially when integrated with personal expression and creative tasks, allows learners to take ownership of their language development. It transforms them from passive recipients of input into active constructors of meaning, aligning with learner-centered approaches in modern language pedagogy.

Taken together, these theoretical frameworks underscore the multifaceted value of writing in language acquisition. They demonstrate that writing is not merely a skill to be developed in isolation but a powerful mechanism for learning, reflection, communication and cognitive growth. As such, writing deserves a central place in any comprehensive model of language instruction.

2. Metalinguistic Awareness and Cognitive Processing

Writing supports the development of metalinguistic awareness by compelling learners to think about language form and usage. As learners write, they consciously apply grammatical structures and syntax, which fosters deeper understanding (Ferris, 2002). One student noted during the study: "When I write, I think about the rules I learned. I check myself more than when I speak." This reflective process makes writing particularly effective for consolidating knowledge.

One of the most significant contributions of writing to language acquisition lies in its ability to enhance metalinguistic awareness—the capacity to reflect on and manipulate the structural features of a language. Unlike speaking, which often occurs spontaneously and under time pressure, writing is a slower and more deliberate process. This additional cognitive space allows learners to consciously attend to grammatical rules, vocabulary choice, syntax and overall text organization. Through writing, learners develop a heightened sensitivity to how language functions, both formally and functionally, which in turn facilitates more accurate and sophisticated language use.

Metalinguistic awareness is especially critical in second language acquisition, where learners must internalize a new set of linguistic norms that may differ significantly from those of their first language. Writing provides a platform where these differences can be observed, tested and ultimately mastered. According to Ferris (2002), learners often become more aware of recurring

grammatical errors during writing than during speaking, simply because writing allows them to review and revise their output. For instance, learners are more likely to notice subject-verb agreement issues, article usage, or verb tense consistency when engaged in writing tasks. This conscious attention to form is a key mechanism in language development. Cognitively, writing engages several layers of mental processing. Flower and Hayes (1981) proposed a model of writing as a recursive process involving planning, translating and revising. In the context of language learning, each of these stages requires linguistic decision-making. Planning involves selecting appropriate vocabulary and structuring ideas logically; translating requires transforming thoughts into grammatically correct sentences; revising demands the evaluation of language choices for clarity and accuracy. This process compels learners to engage deeply with the target language, often leading to what Swain (1985) termed “pushed output”—language that goes beyond the learner’s current comfort zone, thus promoting growth.

Furthermore, writing encourages the internalization of complex linguistic structures. Nation (2001) argues that productive tasks, including writing, are essential for reinforcing newly acquired vocabulary and grammar. When learners are asked to use new words in their own writing, they must retrieve, adapt and integrate them meaningfully, thereby strengthening retention. This process also contributes to inter-language development, as learners continuously refine their linguistic systems based on feedback, self-monitoring and exposure to written models.

Learner feedback collected during classroom observations in this study supports these theoretical insights. Many students reported that writing helped them “see their mistakes,” “think about grammar more,” and “try to use new vocabulary correctly.” These comments reflect the cognitive engagement and self-awareness that writing fosters—both of which are vital for long-term language acquisition. Writing is not simply a skill to be acquired but a mental activity that strengthens the language learning process through reflection, hypothesis testing and structured output. It cultivates metalinguistic awareness and activates cognitive processes that are less accessible during oral communication. By making language visible and open to manipulation, writing becomes a powerful engine of linguistic development in both academic and communicative contexts.

One of the most empirically supported benefits of writing in language acquisition is its powerful impact on vocabulary retention and development. Vocabulary is a core component of communicative competence and learners’ ability to use words accurately and flexibly is essential for both fluency and precision. While listening and reading offer valuable exposure to lexical input, writing requires active production and contextualized use of vocabulary, which deepens memory and fosters long-term retention (Nation, 2001).

Research has consistently shown that productive use of vocabulary—such as through writing tasks—results in better learning outcomes than passive exposure alone. In a landmark study, Webb (2005) demonstrated that learners who wrote sentences using new words retained significantly more vocabulary than those who only encountered the words through reading. Writing forces

learners to engage in lexical retrieval, semantic mapping and syntactic integration, all of which contribute to deeper cognitive processing. This increased mental effort helps encode vocabulary into long-term memory.

Furthermore, writing allows learners to personalize vocabulary use, which has been shown to enhance retention. When learners create sentences, paragraphs, or essays using new lexical items, they anchor those items to their own ideas and experiences. This personalization strengthens associative links and promotes greater accessibility of the words in future communicative contexts (Schmitt, 2010). For example, writing about one's hobbies, family, or studies using recently learned vocabulary reinforces not just the meaning of words but their pragmatic function.

Classroom-based observations and learner surveys conducted in this study further reinforce these findings. Over 80% of participants reported that writing helped them remember and use new words more confidently. One learner stated: "When I write something with new words, I feel like I own them. I can use them later when I speak or write again." This learner testimony aligns with the concept of output-enhanced learning, where language production tasks like writing push learners to use language that has been recently acquired, thus consolidating their lexical knowledge (Swain, 1985).

Additionally, writing offers learners repeated and varied opportunities to use vocabulary in different contexts. Unlike single-exposure activities such as reading a text or listening to a recording, writing can involve drafting, revising and editing—each of which demands reconsideration and reapplication of vocabulary choices. This cyclical process of refinement contributes to a deeper understanding of word usage, collocation and register (Hyland, 2003).

In structured pedagogical settings, writing activities such as thematic journals, vocabulary logs and guided essays can be deliberately designed to target specific vocabulary sets. These tasks not only reinforce recent lessons but also train learners to become more autonomous in their vocabulary learning strategies. When writing is integrated systematically into language instruction, it serves as a dynamic tool for lexical development that complements and extends receptive learning.

As a result, writing plays a central role in vocabulary retention and development by converting passive lexical knowledge into active, usable language. It provides learners with opportunities for meaningful production, personalization and repeated exposure, all of which are key factors in successful vocabulary acquisition. As such, writing should be treated not only as a skill to be assessed but as a learning process that strengthens the lexical foundations of language competence.

Research has shown that writing enhances vocabulary acquisition more than receptive tasks alone. Webb (2005) found that learners who actively use new vocabulary in writing tasks are more likely to retain those words over time. Nation (2001) similarly emphasizes that productive use, including writing, leads to greater vocabulary depth. In our survey, 84% of participants indicated that writing helped them remember new words better than reading or listening.

3. Writing in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Although CLT traditionally prioritizes oral fluency, writing tasks such as journal entries, email exchanges and collaborative storytelling can be effectively used to support communicative goals. Hyland (2003) asserts that writing offers opportunities for learners to produce meaningful discourse within authentic contexts. Our classroom observations confirmed that learners engaged more deeply with functional language when writing emails, blog posts, or narrative texts that reflected real-life purposes.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasizes interaction and real-life communication as central to language learning, traditionally prioritizing speaking and listening skills over writing (Savignon, 2002). However, writing remains a critical, though sometimes overlooked, component within the CLT framework. When integrated thoughtfully, writing tasks can significantly enhance learners' communicative competence by providing authentic contexts in which to produce meaningful language.

CLT advocates for language use that mirrors genuine communicative situations and writing activities such as emails, letters, blogs and collaborative stories serve this purpose effectively. Hyland (2003) notes that writing in CLT is not merely about practicing grammatical correctness but about using language functionally to achieve communicative goals. Writing tasks that reflect real-world purposes foster learner motivation and engagement, which are essential for language acquisition.

Moreover, writing complements speaking by allowing learners more time to formulate and refine their messages. While oral interaction requires rapid processing and immediate response, writing affords learners the opportunity to plan, draft and revise their language output (Ferris, 2002). This reflective process enhances not only accuracy but also pragmatic and discourse skills, which are central to communicative competence.

In practical terms, the incorporation of writing into CLT encourages learner-centered and task-based approaches. Writing tasks often require collaboration, negotiation of meaning and exchange of feedback, thus fostering interaction beyond spoken conversation (Storch, 2005). For example, paired or group writing assignments, such as jointly composing an email or story, create authentic opportunities for communication and language development within a supportive social context.

Additionally, writing can support the development of language functions that are harder to practice orally in classroom settings, such as formal requests, apologies, or explanations. Through writing, learners become familiar with genre conventions and register variations, which are critical for effective communication across diverse contexts (Hyland, 2003).

The advent of digital technologies further enhances the role of writing in CLT. Online platforms enable real-time collaboration and authentic communication with peers, teachers and native speakers worldwide, expanding the communicative potential of writing beyond the classroom

(Warschauer, 1996). Digital writing tools also provide immediate feedback, enabling iterative revisions and fostering learner autonomy.

Classroom observations conducted in this study confirm that when writing tasks are designed with communicative purposes in mind, learners display increased motivation and produce more meaningful language. Learners reported that writing authentic texts—such as emails to classmates or blog posts—felt relevant and useful, thereby strengthening their overall language competence. So, writing plays a vital role in CLT by providing learners with opportunities to engage in meaningful communication beyond oral interaction. It supports the development of linguistic, pragmatic and discourse skills in authentic contexts, promotes collaboration and reflection and leverages digital tools to expand communicative possibilities. Therefore, writing should be embraced as an integral component of communicative language teaching rather than a peripheral or purely academic skill.

4. The Role of Digital Tools

Technological platforms—such as Google Docs, blogs and language apps—have revolutionized how writing is integrated into language instruction. These tools allow for immediate feedback, collaborative writing and revision, thus promoting active learning (Hyland, 2003).

Teachers observed in this study frequently used Google Docs to facilitate peer reviews and collaborative writing, which encouraged interaction and reflection. The integration of digital technologies into language education has significantly reshaped the landscape of second language acquisition (SLA), especially in the domain of writing. Digital tools—ranging from word processors and collaborative platforms to mobile applications and online forums—have transformed writing from a solitary, static activity into a dynamic, interactive and socially situated process. These technologies not only enhance the practicality and accessibility of writing but also offer powerful pedagogical advantages for language learners (Warschauer, 2010).

One of the most notable benefits of digital tools is their ability to support collaborative writing and peer interaction, key components of communicative language teaching (CLT) and sociocultural learning theories. Platforms such as Google Docs, Padlet and wikis allow multiple users to work on the same text in real time, providing immediate feedback, suggestions and corrections. This collaborative environment aligns with Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners develop language competence through interaction with more knowledgeable peers or instructors.

Furthermore, digital tools enable asynchronous writing—such as discussion forums, blogs and e-Portfolios—which give learners more time to reflect, plan and revise their texts. This extended processing time supports the development of metalinguistic awareness, as learners can consciously apply grammatical rules and lexical knowledge in their writing (Hyland, 2016). Research indicates that writing in digital environments increases learner engagement, particularly among those who may be hesitant to participate in spoken communication (Sun, 2010).

Another significant contribution of digital tools is the availability of automated feedback systems and writing enhancement technologies. Applications like Grammarly, Write & Improve and various AI-powered writing assistants provide instant feedback on grammar, vocabulary, coherence and style. While not a replacement for human instruction, these tools help learners identify and correct errors independently, promoting autonomy and reinforcing learning through repeated practice (Li, Link, & Hegelheimer, 2015).

Moreover, digital writing platforms often support multimodal composition, where learners can integrate text with images, audio and video. This form of expression enhances communicative competence by allowing learners to convey meaning through various modes, reflecting the diversity of real-world communication. It also caters to different learning styles and encourages creativity and personal expression, which are crucial for motivation and sustained engagement (Kessler, 2013).

In this study's classroom observations, digital writing tasks were associated with increased learner motivation, more frequent use of target vocabulary and higher levels of revision. For example, students writing blog posts or social media updates in English demonstrated greater attention to audience, tone and structure—elements often neglected in traditional academic writing. Survey participants also reported that the interactive nature of digital writing tools made them feel more confident and autonomous in their language use.

However, the effective use of digital tools requires careful pedagogical integration. Teachers must scaffold activities, ensure access and provide guidance on digital literacy and responsible use. When applied strategically, digital tools can bridge the gap between formal writing instruction and the informal, socially driven writing that characterizes much of modern communication. So, digital tools have significantly expanded the scope and effectiveness of writing in language acquisition. They facilitate collaboration, feedback, autonomy and authentic communication—key factors in language development. As technology continues to evolve, its thoughtful incorporation into language pedagogy will be essential for preparing learners to write effectively in diverse academic, professional and digital contexts.

Conclusion

Writing is not only a productive skill but also a cognitive and metalinguistic tool in language acquisition. Theoretical models, empirical research and classroom practices all point to its importance in developing grammatical accuracy, vocabulary retention and communicative competence. Despite its underrepresentation in some curricula, writing should be central to any comprehensive language learning program. Educators are encouraged to incorporate varied writing tasks—academic, creative and functional—to promote well-rounded language development.

Writing is far more than a mechanical skill or academic requirement—it is a dynamic and cognitively demanding process that plays an indispensable role in language acquisition. As demonstrated throughout this article, writing supports the internalization of linguistic structures,

fosters metalinguistic awareness, promotes vocabulary retention and strengthens both accuracy and fluency. Unlike speaking, which often demands spontaneous and surface-level production, writing offers learners the opportunity to plan, reflect, revise and refine their language output. This process nurtures deeper cognitive engagement with the target language, leading to more meaningful and lasting acquisition.

Theoretical models, such as Swain's (1985) Output Hypothesis and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, clearly support writing as a vital mode of language production. Writing compels learners to engage with language analytically, identify gaps in their knowledge and actively construct meaning. These processes contribute significantly to the development of grammatical competence, lexical control and discourse awareness—skills that are essential for effective communication in both academic and real-world contexts.

Moreover, writing in language learning is not an isolated skill but one that reinforces and is reinforced by other domains. It enhances reading comprehension, supports speaking by building vocabulary and structural fluency and contributes to listening by training learners to anticipate syntactic and semantic patterns. Writing also provides a concrete record of language development over time, allowing for reflection, assessment and targeted feedback. This makes it an invaluable tool not only for learners but also for educators aiming to track progress and tailor instruction.

The integration of writing into Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and task-based learning models further illustrates its communicative potential. Far from being a rigid or purely academic exercise, writing can and should serve authentic, functional purposes—such as writing emails, blogs, stories and reports—that mirror real-life communication. These tasks enhance learner engagement, motivation and autonomy, especially when paired with peer collaboration and feedback.

The digital age has further expanded the role of writing in language learning. Online tools and platforms support real-time collaboration, provide automated feedback and offer diverse formats for multimodal expression. Learners today are not confined to pen-and-paper essays; they engage in digital storytelling, blogging, discussion forums and social media writing—all of which offer rich opportunities for language use in meaningful contexts. These developments underscore the importance of updating pedagogical approaches to embrace digital literacy alongside traditional writing instruction.

Despite its many benefits, writing often remains underutilized in language classrooms, especially in early stages of learning or in contexts where speaking is prioritized. To fully leverage the potential of writing, educators must move beyond viewing it as a passive skill or assessment tool and instead treat it as an active, ongoing process of language construction. This requires deliberate curricular design, scaffolding and meaningful integration with other skills.

In conclusion, writing is not merely a support to language acquisition—it is a central pillar of it. Its cognitive, communicative and metalinguistic benefits make it an essential component of

effective language instruction. Whether through narrative essays, collaborative projects, or digital compositions, writing enables learners to take control of their language development, articulate their thoughts with precision and engage more deeply with the language they are learning. For educators, embracing writing as a core element of instruction is not only beneficial—it is indispensable to cultivating truly competent and confident language users.

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