

# Clarifying the Relationship between L2 Writing and Translingual Writing: An Open Letter to Writing Studies Editors and Organization Leaders

**Dwight Atkinson, University of Arizona**  
**Deborah Crusan, Wright State University**  
**Paul Kei Matsuda, Arizona State University**  
**Christina Ortmeier-Hooper, University of New Hampshire**  
**Todd Ruecker, University of New Mexico**  
**Steve Simpson, New Mexico Tech**  
**Christine Tardy, University of Arizona**

**W**e are writing as a concerned group of second language (L2) writing professionals to call attention to a problematic trend developing among writing studies scholars based in North America: a growing misunderstanding that L2 writing and translingual writing are somehow competing with each other or, worse yet, that one is replacing the other. Because of the influential role that professional organizations and journals play in the field of writing studies, we wish to emphasize the importance of encouraging the development of L2 writing and translingual writing as related yet distinct areas of research and teaching. In this letter, we suggest ways of facilitating a more productive understanding of the role of both approaches to writing in writing studies organizations and journals.

With growing language diversity in writing classes across the United States, members of the L2 writing community have long advocated for the need of all writing professionals to be aware of the linguistic diversity of their student populations and how to best serve them. L2 writing scholars at CCCC have been working for decades to develop resources and strategies for supporting writing teachers and program administrators in working more effectively with L2 writers. Because of the growing diversity of higher education, L2 writing specialists have called for all writing researchers, instructors, and administrators to have training in working with L2 writers.

The broadening interest in language diversity brought on by the increasing popularity of translingualism is certainly welcome, as it is long overdue in writing

studies. Recently, however, there seems to be a tendency to conflate L2 writing and translingual writing, and view the latter as a replacement for or improved version of L2 writing. This is not consistent with our understanding of the field of L2 writing.

L2 writing is an international and transdisciplinary field of study that is concerned with any issues related to the phenomenon of writing in a language that is acquired later in life. *Second language* or *L2* is a technical term that refers to any language other than the first language. Although the term, if taken literally, may seem to exclude people with multiple first languages, L2 writing scholars are often the first to critique those assumptions in their own publications and presentations. Within the field, there are various theoretical, methodological, and ideological perspectives, and they do not presuppose any particular ideological orientation. In fact, much of what has been discussed under the term *translingual* writing has long been part of the conversation in the field of L2 writing.

Translingual writing is a particular orientation to how language is conceptualized and implicated in the study and teaching of writing. It emphasizes the fluidity, malleability, and discriminatory potential of languages. It challenges the static view of language and writing, privileges the view of multiple languages as resources, and calls for a more agentive use of various language resources in constructing and negotiating meaning, identity, and even larger ideological conditions. Translingual writing is valuable in that it highlights issues that fall between traditional conceptions of L1 and L2 writing—issues that have traditionally been addressed by writing studies scholars informed by insights from sociolinguistics. Although translingual writing and L2 writing overlap in their critique of the historically monolingual, English Only focus of composition studies, translingual writing has not widely taken up the task of helping L2 writers increase their proficiency in what might still be emerging L2s and develop and use their multiple language resources to serve their own purposes. As a field, L2 writing has also been addressing the ideological concerns highlighted in translingual writing as well as the task of helping L2 writers develop and use their multiple language resources to serve their own purposes.

This recent tendency to conflate L2 writing and translingual writing has manifested itself in several ways:

- **Narrowed focus:** Some proponents of translingual writing have suggested that translingualism is an encompassing term for a variety of fields, including L2 writing. Yet, translingual writing is only one orientation toward language difference, which limits attention paid to other but equally important work.
- **Reviewer feedback:** L2 writing scholars have been receiving comments from editors and reviewers that demonstrate a misunderstanding of major distinctions between L2 writing and translingualism and a lack of familiarity with L2 writing scholarship. For instance, authors have been requested to reference translingual writing scholarship even when it is not theoretically or practically relevant to the work they are undertaking.
- **Conference presence:** In recent years, the confusion between L2 writing and translingual writing at CCCC has led to the marginalization of L2 writing scholarship and

scholars, to the extent that some L2 scholars have left or are considering leaving CCCC for other conferences such as the American Association for Applied Linguistics (AAAL) and TESOL International Association. This may exacerbate the disciplinary division of labor that had long divided writing studies from disciplines focused on the study of language learning.

- **Hiring practices:** Postsecondary institutions seeking specialists to support the needs of L2 writers have hired scholars with expertise in translingualism but not necessarily L2 writing, which limits the support that students—and the programs and instructors that support them—can receive.

We understand that translingual approaches are useful in challenging dominant language ideologies and in emphasizing the language resources students bring to the writing classroom. This broad agenda addresses some aspects of communicative strategies and language awareness that are important in working in their disciplines, professions, and beyond. Our aim in this letter is not to diminish the value of translingual approaches, but rather to call attention to the distinctions between translingualism and the field of second language writing, while acknowledging overlaps as well.

Because of the concerns just described, we urge writing studies leaders and journal editors to

- recognize the unique contribution of L2 writing as its own field while acknowledging that it shares certain common foci with translingual writing;
- understand that translingual writing is not a replacement for L2 writing;
- understand that L2 writing researchers need not necessarily situate themselves within conversations about translingual writing when establishing the significance of their work;
- understand the importance of selecting reviewers for conferences and journals who comprehend the distinct nature of L2 writing scholarship;
- understand that job candidates professing translingual writing expertise may lack expertise in training writing teachers and developing writing curricula supportive of emerging L2 writers in ways that are both practical and critical.

Thank you for your continued service to the field and for supporting a strong future for L2 writers, teachers, and scholars in the field of writing studies.

The following second language writing specialists have endorsed this letter:

Diane Belcher, Georgia State University

Christine Pearson Casanave, Temple University

Pisarn Bee Chamcharatsri, University of New Mexico

Michelle Cox, Cornell University

Angela Dadak, American University

Kevin Eric DePew, Old Dominion University

Christine Feak, University of Michigan

Dana Ferris, University of California–Davis

Lynn Goldstein, The Monterey Institute of International Studies

John Hedgcock, The Monterey Institute of International Studies  
 Alan Hirvela, The Ohio State University  
 Ann Johns, San Diego State University  
 Jay Jordan, University of Utah  
 Kate Mangelsdorf, University of Texas–El Paso  
 Susan Miller-Cochran, North Carolina State University  
 Vaidehi Ramanathan, University of California–Davis  
 Tanita Saenkhum, University of Tennessee–Knoxville  
 Carol Severino, University of Iowa  
 Shawna Shapiro, Middlebury College  
 Gail Shuck, Boise State University  
 Tony Silva, Purdue University  
 John Swales, University of Michigan  
 Margi Wald, University of California–Berkeley  
 Wei Zhu, University of South Florida

#### SUGGESTED READING

##### *L2 Writing and Translingual Writing*

- Cox, Michelle, and Terry Myers Zawacki. "Introduction." *WAC and Second-Language Writers: Research towards Linguistically and Culturally Inclusive Programs and Practices*. Ed. Michelle Cox and Terry Myers Zawacki. Fort Collins: WAC Clearinghouse. <http://wac.colostate.edu/books/l2/intro.pdf>.
- Ferris, Dana. Review. "'English Only' and Multilingualism in Composition Studies: Policy, Philosophy, and Practice." *College English* 77.1 (2014): 75–85.
- Matsuda, Paul Kei. "It's the Wild West Out There: A New Linguistic Frontier in U.S. College Composition." *Literacy as Translingual Practice: Between Communities and Classrooms*. Ed. A. Suresh Canagarajah. New York: Routledge, 2013. 128–38.
- Matsuda, Paul Kei. "The Lure of Translingual Writing." *PMLA* 129.3 (2014): 478–83.

##### *L2 Writing as a Field*

- Leki, Ilona, Alister Cumming, and Tony Silva. *A Synthesis of Research on Second Language Writing in English*. New York: Routledge, 2008.
- Matsuda, Paul Kei. "Situating ESL Writing in a Cross-Disciplinary Context." *Written Communication* 15.1 (1998): 99–121.
- Matsuda, Paul Kei, Michelle Cox, Jay Jordan, and Christina Ortmeier-Hooper, eds. *Second-Language Writing in the Composition Classroom: A Critical Sourcebook*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2006.
- Silva, Tony, and Ilona Leki. "Family Matters: The Influence of Applied Linguistics and Composition Studies on Second Language Writing Studies—Past, Present, and Future." *Modern Language Journal* 88.1 (2004): 1–13.

For more resources, please see "CCCC Statement on Second Language Writing and Writers": <http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/secondlangwriting>.