Rationales for supporting writing production in a foreign language.

Purpose of this document

Being able to write independently in a foreign language is an important part of language proficiency. Indeed, the written assessment in the new GCSE in England (DfE, 2022) will, as currently, be under timed exam conditions and without use of resources, foregrounding the need for students to be able to write independently.

However, when students are asked to write in a foreign language, many turn to machine translation (MT; e.g., Google Translate) to help them, even if a teacher has asked them not to. Arguably, this is a very sensible course of action – given the potential usefulness of such technology and the students' need to produce language that (they perceive to be) beyond the language that they can draw from their own memories. However, there are limitations—and even some potential harm—in using such technology, especially if students do not understand its limitations.

This document aims to provide some evidence-informed guidance about supporting independent writing, by summarising some research into: why learners use machine translation and its possible positive and negative impacts on writing; the need for learners to understand the distinction between writing and translation; the role of metacognition in second language (L2) writing; the roles of task repetition and feedback in writing development. We focus on the potential benefits of pre-writing (i.e., planning and preparation) activities for writing development and provide a rationale for their use and for related classroom and homework resources.

Machine Translation: Benefits and limitations

Learning to use MT can bring benefits, such as increased accuracy, increased sentence level complexity, and a wider range of vocabulary (Cancino & Panes, 2021; Niño, 2009, cited in Organ, 2022; Zhu, 2020). These benefits may reduce learner anxiety and improve learner confidence, both reasons given for using MT (Organ, 2022). Understanding MT's limitations is also considered to benefit learners (Cancino & Panes, 2021; Zhu, 2020), particularly in a guided and controlled setting (Lee, 2020).

Whilst recognizing these benefits, more evidence is needed about longer-term impacts of using MT. For example, it is not yet clear from research whether a wider range of vocabulary is maintained over time or is only observed in the short-term. Moreover, there are reasons to *not* use MT in L2 writing. Learners themselves can perceive it as lazy, risky (due to inaccuracies or 'getting

caught' due to a perception that it constitutes cheating; Organ, 2022). Also, assessing production that may have drawn on MT brings specific challenges in terms of ensuring fairness (as described by Somers, et al., 2006).

MT may even have adverse effects by allowing learners to avoid using certain cognitive processes—such as drawing upon their *own* language systems. These cognitive processes can benefit learning to write (Murtisari et al, 2019, cited in Panes, 2021) and for learning more generally by creating a 'desirable difficulty' (Suzuki et al, 2019). Using MT may even prove demotivational (Stapleton & Kin, 2019, cited in Cancino & Panes, 2021). Perhaps such demotivation is because any boost in confidence can prove illusory if learners cannot write independently of MT or other written support that allows the learner to complete writing tasks without drawing on their own language resources.

Translation versus L2 writing: Where MT cannot help. MT is, by definition, a tool for 'translation'! But there is a risk of conflating the 'writing process' and 'translation'. Learners and teachers need to be aware that translation and writing are not synonymous, even though they both have the same modality and mode (written production). Translation can be defined as the transfer of meaning from one language to another, requiring meaning to be rendered on multiple levels. At advanced levels, it factors in source and target text type, genre, and purpose, as well as cultural specificities and linguistic conventions in L1 and L2 (Baker, 1992, 2011). It requires the translator to render *someone else*'s meaning in another language. Writing, on the other hand, is the ability to convey the *writer*'s meaning in written form. Writing independently and translation both draw on separate knowledge and skills. MT cannot support a learner in knowing what to say, planning structure, creating argumentation, or using discourse devices (such as connectives or use of tense or 'viewpoint aspect' – when something happened relative to something else). Rather than MT, and ***in addition to core components of knowledge*** (vocabulary - including discourse devices, grammar, spelling), teaching and learning some '***metacognitive strategies***' may support independent L2 writing.

Metacognition and L2 writing: A way to support learners

Metacognition can be defined as a learner's awareness of their own thinking (Flavell, 1979, cited in Kessler, 2021). More specifically it refers to "a set of processes an individual uses in monitoring ongoing cognition so as to effectively control his or her own behaviour" (Rhodes 2019, p.168); and as "the ability to reflect upon, understand, and control one's learning" (Schraw & Dennison, 1994, p.460, cited in Kessler 2021, p. 2). Metacognition can be sub-divided into (a) metacognition of knowledge itself, i.e., awareness of one's own knowledge or thoughts (i.e., cognition), and (b) metacognition of

regulation (i.e., how knowledge is put to use). Metacognitive regulation includes **planning** prior to task performance (Negretti, 2012; Schraw, 2009, cited in Kessler, 2019) as well as **monitoring** during the task and **evaluation** after the task (Wenden, 1988, cited in Bailey, 2019). We can draw on theories and evidence about metacognition to aid learners in their L2 writing. Here we focus on the *planning* component of metacognition.

Planning as one type of metacognition. Metacognition can happen when we plan to do something, or when we think about doing it. Ellis and Yuan (2004) found that planning enhanced L2 writing, improving not only learners' actual language, but also the content and structural organisation of their writing. Some research has examined how elements of a task can push a learners' attentional resources towards different dimensions of the language they produce, e.g., accuracy, complexity, fluency (e.g., Robinson, 2012, cited in Johnson, 2020, p.435). If a task includes 'planning' beforehand, this can help learners to 'direct' their attentional resources and may reduce demands on their working memory when they then come to actually do the writing (Tabari, 2022). This may enable learners to focus on the quality of the language, e.g., the accuracy or complexity, of their writing (Ellis, 2019, cited in Tabari, 2022), and fluency (Johnson, 2017, Ellis, 2019, cited in Tabari, 2022, see also Révész, Kourtali, & Mazgutova, 2017). The amount and type of planning done before a writing task "can be manipulated to facilitate the production of language that is complex (syntactically and/or lexically), accurate, and/or fluent." (Johnson, 2020, p.433).[1]

What counts as 'planning'? Planning can include idea generation, structure and argumentation planning, setting writing goals, or preparing linguistic aspects of the writing. Uludag, McDonough, and Payant (2021) found that the quality of planning can make a difference to the written production. Their study further suggested that the quality of the planning is affected by a student's proficiency. This could suggest that templates designed for different proficiencies of learners may help guide learners (e.g., at Foundation Tier and Higher Tier levels, see https://resources.ncelp.org/ for examples). These templates may change as students progress through their learning, so that their planning and writing skills are scaffolded towards independent planning and writing. Once learners understand the planning process (perhaps by working collaboratively on some planning activities during class time), planning activities can be given as work to do outside the class. This way, time in class can be used to complete the full writing task. This may have benefits such as

[1] Grey literature (not peer-reviewed by researchers) about GCSE students' writing also supports the idea of planning (Eduqas GCSE German Examiners' Report, Summer 2022).

teachers being able to (a) control/inhibit access to MT when students are producing the piece of writing and (b) provide immediate feedback during the writing process, at least to some students, whilst circulating around the class.

Should planning be in the L1 or L2? Research suggests that there are benefits to allowing some L1 use in the L2 classroom, and this includes the writing process, for example in the early stages such as establishing keywords to be used in the writing (Beiler, 2019). There is evidence that learners at different proficiencies employ different strategies for planning writing, with lower proficiency learners tending to write ideas in their L1 more than higher proficiency learners (Maarof & Murat, 2013, cited in Bailey, 2019). It is also expected that learners in the initial stages of learning will usually access most of their L2 vocabulary via their L1 (according to many theoretical models, including Kroll et al, 2010); given that many GCSE learners have only had a few hundred hours of instruction (and therefore exposure to) the target language, it seems reasonable to expect that many will want to start their planning in the L1. This may then necessitate explicit strategies to allow them to work from their L1 to consider what they are actually able to express in their L2, and amend their intentions accordingly.

Feedback on writing

Planning can be complemented with revision and feedback opportunities, on both the planning itself and of the full product (Sengupta, 2000, cited in Johnson, 2020). Therefore, in line with the principle of systematically revisiting the practice of knowledge (such as the use of grammar and vocabulary), repeating the writing task itself is likely to benefit writing for some learners. Ajabshir and Poorebrahim (2021) found that task repetition resulted in "significant linguistic gains in terms of accuracy, complexity and fluency" (p.302). This finding aligns with research by Bygate (2001) and Zuniga and Payant (2021). Repeating the writing task, Zuniga and Payant (2021) note, "may also be a way to alleviate the cognitive load experienced during writing tasks." (p.52). The repetition of the task may offer learners the opportunity to use any feedback that they received on their first iteration. But what kind of feedback can be offered?

Feedback for writing can vary along several dimensions (Crosthwaite, Ningrum, & Lee, 2022). It can be: 'focused' (on only specific features or issues, e.g., past tenses) or 'unfocused' (on any issues that the instructor would like to correct); 'direct' (where errors are corrected) or 'indirect' (where errors are highlighted but prompts are given, for example, a code such as 'sp.' for spelling); 'immediate' (during the writing process, e.g. with a teacher circulating or

during synchronous online communication using a chat function) or 'delayed' (given some time after the writing process). There is some evidence that:

- ***focused*** feedback tends to result in fewer errors in the next piece of writing relative to unfocused feedback (Bitchener, 2021; van Beuningen et al., 2012) especially where errors are also corrected (Roothooft et al., 2022);
- ***direct*** feedback on writing is more effective than using codes to indicate errors, especially where a lot of codes are used; (van Beuningen et al., 2012);
- ***immediate*** feedback (where it can be given) is more effective than delayed feedback (Nakata, 2015; Fu & Li, 2022).

Evans et al. (2010) point to the need to consider several variables when deciding on feedback type. They caution that if the volume of feedback is too great then even the most capable learners are not able to process or learn from the feedback, yet they observe that focusing on a limited number of errors can also be impractical. Therefore, they propose limiting "the length of the writing task to ensure dynamic written corrective feedback remains manageable", thereby also "ensuring that feedback is meaningful, timely and constant." (p.453)

However, research to date on writing feedback is somewhat inconclusive (as noted by van Beuningen, 2021). More research is needed—and particularly with students in the relevant educational context—to investigate, for example, the impact of feedback styles on writing development. Bitchener (2021) similarly observes that research to date does not indicate that any one type is inherently better than another, at least not for all learners all of the time, and that numerous variables need to be considered, including learners' level.

For feedback—in whatever form—to be effective, the learner needs opportunity and willingness to engage with it. Storch (2021) highlights that learner responsiveness to feedback is crucial and that learners should be active in the feedback process (see also Lantolf & Pavlenko, 2021). Follow-up conversations *about* feedback may promote such engagement (Bitchener, 2021; Storch, 2021). Clearly, however, in a whole class setting, individual conversations are difficult to implement. For large classes, techniques such as audio-recorded personalized feedback or whole class summary feedback may help engage learners with feedback, although these tend to be one-way rather than bi-directional, and generic rather than learner-focused, respectively. As such, it is not clear that such techniques *reliably* provoke substantial additional engagement from all individuals. A teacher circulating to provide immediate personalized feedback wherever possible is perhaps likely to provoke individualized engagement. In addition, as noted above, opportunities to revise through task repetition are also likely to increase engagement with feedback.

Concluding Remarks and Recommendations

It seems likely that a variety of approaches to feedback will be helpful, and these will change as learning progresses. But it is also important to manage teachers' and learners' expectations by bearing in mind that error correction on writing—alone—will not easily and reliably lead to long term retention. Correction can encourage the use of avoidance strategies so that writing is more simplified, weaknesses are hidden, or new structures are not used (see Truscott, 2007; Truscott & Yi-ping Hsu, 2008). Also, corrective feedback on writing is unlikely to impact time-pressured, unprepared (i.e., spontaneous) spoken production.

There seems to be evidence supporting:

(i) the use of planning (perhaps using templates to scaffold this planning for different proficiencies) to improve accuracy, complexity, and fluency of written production;

(ii) opportunities to revise work and repeat a writing task systematically;

(iii) the provision of feedback. Given current evidence, feedback on writing seems likely to be most reliably effective (for most learners, most of the time) if it is *focused*, *direct,* and *immediate*, but these issues need further corroboration from research.

Note: planning tends to produce writing that is more accurate, complex, and fluent than writing that has not been planned. We have discussed this observation in terms of the benefits for **learning**. However, when thinking about the implications for **assessment**, this means that the opportunity to plan beforehand means that the subsequent written production cannot be reliably considered to be a true reflection of a learner's ability to write under time pressure. Writing under genuine time pressure is likely to be less accurate, less complex, and less fluent relative to writing that is produced *without* the opportunity to plan. This has important consequences for how we mark writing under different conditions.

Selected accessible summaries of research

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Link to NCELP CPD sessions

CPD session on Error correction on oral (and written) production
Click HERE: https://resources.ncelp.org/collections/z029p521n?locale=en

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Grey (non-peer reviewed) literature

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Eduqas GCSE German Examiners' Report, Summer 2022. https://www.eduqas.co.uk/umbraco/surface/blobstorage/download?nodeId=42182