

## Teaching Reading and Writing: Theories and Practices

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### Abstract

The importance of combining reading and writing has already been recognized by university language teachers. This paper addresses the theoretical basis for the combination as well as the guidance of the approaches upon second language teaching (SLT) in China. The approaches to second language acquisition (SLA) have experienced three stages: cognitive approach, socio-cultural approach, and socio-cognitive approach, and these approaches shed huge lights on teaching reading and writing in the university settings of China.

**Key words:** Reading; Writing; Approaches to SLA; SLT in China

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### INTRODUCTION

The necessity of combining reading and writing has already been recognized by language teachers, university teachers in particular, for ample evidence has been found confirming their mutual influence. First, in most second language acquisition situations, especially in university situations, interactions through reading and writing or the role of literacy seem to be pivotal in classroom language learning, because for adult learners, second

language acquisition may be triggered more through literary activities than through interaction (Weissberg, 2006a). Secondly, any descriptions and theories of second language acquisition that deal with classroom or with literate individuals are incomplete until they consider the role of reading and writing in acquisition (Harklau, 2002). Thirdly, compared with speaking, writing, another form of language production, may give the language learner more opportunity to notice the gaps or holes, which can be “registered only fleetingly in conversational interaction” (Williams, 2008), or written language production may be especially helpful in promoting noticing (Adams & Ross-Feldman, 2008). Therefore, this paper attempts to view reading and writing from the general approaches to second language acquisition (SLA) as well as the guiding functions of these approaches upon second language teaching (SLT).

### 1. APPROACHES TO SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Approaches to SLA are mainly the following three: cognitive approach, socio-cultural approach, and socio-cognitive approach. In a sense, they represent the linear developmental stages in the field of SLA, and thus some of the terms would be adopted in all the approaches.

#### 1.1 Cognitive Approach

Reading and writing should first be understood from the studies of input and output. Since Krashen (1982) put out the Input Hypothesis, most people have agreed with its claim that input, either oral or written, is the major causal vehicle for L2 acquisition (Rassaei, 2017). However, some researchers later found that input alone, though necessary, is not sufficient, because acquisition is a more complex mental process. In addition to comprehending input, acquiring a language requires noticing linguistic features in input in order to establish

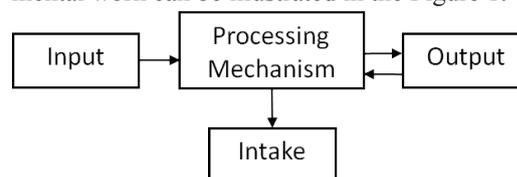
form-meaning connections held in working memory and available for further processing (Lee & VanPatten, 2003; VanPatten, 2003). Thus Output Hypothesis was later proposed by Swan (1985). Without negating the importance of input or input comprehension, Output Hypothesis emphasizes its potential function of bringing about mental processes that both directly and indirectly affect acquisition. In other words, the intention of Output Hypothesis is to complement and reinforce, rather than replace input-based approaches to language acquisition (Izumi & Bigelow, 2000). A central tenet of the original formulation of the Output Hypothesis is that challenging output entails a consciousness-raising function that could result in promoting learners to fill in their noticed gaps or to engage in more focused attention to incoming input (Manchón, 2011). According to Swain (2000; 2005), output plays several major roles in language acquisition, including noticing function, hypothesis testing function, and also metalinguistic function.

Noticing function among the three has received much more attention from scholars. The Noticing Hypothesis, as proposed in the 1990s by Schmidt, claims that noticing requires awareness and is a necessary condition for second language acquisition, that is, only what has been noticed in the input can become intake (Uggen, 2012). Shegar, Zhang, and Low (2013) also emphasize the role of consciousness-raising and noticing-the-gap, suggesting that acquisition is not possible without the conscious noticing of form-meaning mapping in the input. The noticing function of output hypothesis means that learners come to notice their linguistic problems when trying to produce language, which then prompts them to notice the gap between their interlanguage form and the target form upon receiving relevant input (Izumi & Bigelow, 2000). Furthermore, compared with task repetition and stimulated recall, noticing, facilitated by exposure to native speakers' reformulated writing, can promote learning of more target like forms (Adams, 2003).

Classroom researches have turned to seek for the effects of both input-based and output-based instructions. Some of the findings seem to approve the enhancement role of output, suggesting that both input-based and output-based instructions lead to linguistic development, for example, when practice in output is meaningful, it leads learners to make form-meaning connections (Morgan-Short & Bowden, 2006). Others propose that output-based task-induced activities are more effective in improving learners' autonomy in writing (Salimi & Shams, 2016).

The unique role of output-based instruction in language acquisition has been further evidenced in Shintani (2011), which has found similar levels of effects for input-based and production-based instruction on vocabulary acquisition, but an examination of the process features indicates that the input-based tasks would

provide more opportunities for richer interaction for the learners than the production-based activities. In other words, input-based instruction provides opportunities for learners to produce, and production-based instruction also provides opportunities for learners to comprehend input, and output can lead to deeper processing and can direct learner's attention to form, resulting in a better acquisition than input. Put it simple, output treatments can influence learners' subsequent cognitive processes as a primary device, so subsequent input serves to reinforce subsequent output processing (Uggen, 2012). The bilateral relationship between input and output of an individual's mental work can be illustrated in the Figure 1:



**Figure 1**  
**Cognitive approach to SLA**

From this figure, we can see that either input hypothesis or output hypothesis in the SLA process is considered, almost unanimously, to be an internalized cognitive process, and learning is an individual mental activity independent of social context (Brown & White, 2010). This view is severely criticized and vividly explained by Atkinson's (2002) "cactus metaphor", which implies that language learners, unlike the solitary cactus sitting in the middle of a lonely scene for the rare rain, are in effect trying every means to acquire language, because input did not come pouring in. Regarding the mainstream SLA as "decontextualized internalization", Atkinson (2002) further elaborates that "although language is clearly internalized in a sense of L1 acquisition, it never ceases to be part of the learner-as-social member's set of interactively constructed social tools, practices, and experiences".

In sum, most of the researches of input and output hypothesis in SLA have recognized the importance of language learners' cognitive processing or the complex mental process, but they have neglected the importance of the outside influencing factors. Furthermore, their focus is mainly on vocabulary or sentence structures. Therefore it is of necessity to go beyond the levels of vocabulary and sentence structure to pay more attention to how language learners construct their thought and language during the process of integrating reading (input) and writing (output).

## 1.2 Socio-Cultural Approach

SLA's first 20 years, from 1970s to 1990s, has been dominated by cognitive approaches. After that, socio-cultural perspective on language and learning arrived to this field, which views language use in real-world situations as fundamental, not ancillary, to learning. In fact, according to Zuengler and Miller (2006), SLA

research using Vygotskian Socio-cultural Theory first began to appear in the mid-1980s but quickly gained momentum in the mid-1990s with a special issue of the *Modern Language Journal*.

Socio-cultural Theory is defined by (Ratner, 2002) as the field that “studies the content, mode of operation, and interrelationship of psychological phenomena that are socially constructed and shared, and are rooted in other social artifacts”. Accordingly, human psychological processes are organized by three fundamental cultural factors: activities, artifacts, and concepts (Lantolf, 2006). Based on this theory, internalization/intake is a result of the cooperation of both the cognitive and the social factors in transforming the externals into personally meaningful internals.

Though Vygotskian socio-cultural theory is fundamentally concerned with understanding the development of cognitive processes, it differs from traditional cognitive approaches, which can be best highlighted by citing Vygotsky (1979): “The social dimension of consciousness [i.e., all mental processes] is primary in time and fact. The individual dimension of consciousness is derivative and second”. Weissberg (2006a) claims that “Vygotsky’s theory of the cognitive shifts from the interpersonal plane of social discourse to the intrapersonal plane of the learners’ mind”. Its implication in language learning is that learning is firstly social and secondly individual.

The interactions either between individuals or within individuals are regarded as the language learning sources, which promote the popularity of “dialogic approach” in second language acquisition. Dialogic teaching or learning emphasizes more on the authentic classroom interactions, which go beyond the interactional forms. In this sense, “dialogic talk functions to model and support cognitive activity and inquiry and supportive classroom relations, to engage multiple voices and perspectives across time, and to animate students ideas and contributions” (Boyd & Markarian, 2015). According to this view, if a teacher adopts a dialogic stance, he/she would listen to, lead and follow, respond and direct the class so as to guide the students to think critically. Concerned with language writing classroom, the dialogic approach highlights the importance of talk/discussion during the whole writing process, which is specifically divided into five steps: pre-writing talk; invention talk; prompting; responding to students’ writing; and reflective talk (Weissberg, 2006b).

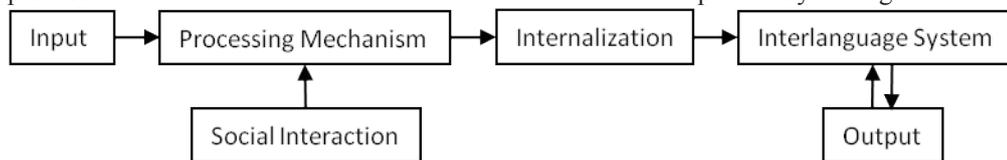
Researchers adopting this view focus on language not as input, but as a resource for participation of activities that our everyday lives comprise. Participation in these activities is both the product and the process of learning. In their viewpoint, learning is using or vice versa. They assert that social interaction is more than just a context in which language learning takes place, but that it is rather the very source of language learning (Brown & White, 2010). In the social interactions, social context is regarded

as a “triggering mechanism, fostering the maturation of innate structures” (Larsen-Freeman, 2010), and neither language use nor language learning can be adequately defined without recognizing both the social and the cognitive dimension which interact, for language use is language learning which is “cumulative, emergent, and ongoing” (Batstone, 2010). This view of language learning presupposes that “interaction is a complex process where cognition is interdependent with social context” (ibid. 19). Schrader (2015) proposes that cognitive and socio-cultural constructivist perspectives are two sides of the same coin, and they are inseparable.

Socio-cultural perspective emphasizes interaction and collaboration between individuals. Promoted by this view, language teaching researchers shifted to promote the importance of an interactive classroom atmosphere. But because of the affective factors of individual learners, whether they are willing to communicate poses a new challenge to language teachers and researchers. If they are motivated by the task, they would be willing to participate in the interactions. Otherwise, they would refuse to communicate. Put it another way, to propel classroom communication, various factors should be taken into account. Social factors, including language learners’ individual characteristics and classroom environmental conditions, are always exerting either facilitative or inhibitive effects on the individuals’ linguistic factors, and hence the results of the classroom interactions are sometimes difficult to predict (Cao, 2014). The pedagogical implication of a socio-cultural perspective is that cognition of language is interwoven with and inseparable from experience, cultural knowledge, emotion, and social identity (Atkinson, 2002), so in classroom teaching, the dynamic situational factors as well as the individual characteristics of the language learners should be given adequate attention.

Based on this view, knowledge is not directly imparted on the students by the instructors, but is both reconstructed and co-constructed in the process of interactions. In this process, how learners “internalize” the knowledge is another important term in Vygotsky’s perspective, and it also needs to be explained here. The development of human beings begins with external social activity and ends with internal individual activity (in which knowledge becomes one’s own), and concerned with how consciousness emerges out of human social life and activity, internalization is regarded as part of a larger picture (Ball, 2000). Internalization is the process of coming to understand something independently of someone else’s thoughts or understandings, or the understanding of something in one’s own mind (ibid: 251). However, internalization is not the opposite, but the essential part of creativity (Steiner & Meehan, 2000). There must be some triggers or facilitators that exist between the external social activities and the internal

individual learners. Classroom discussions and reflective written texts function as this type of intermediate transforming contexts and play very important roles in the process.



**Figure 2**  
**Socio-cultural theory and SLA**

In this figure, cognitive constructs such as “input” and “output” are still used because they are socio-cognitive in nature, and in these constructs we can see the influence of social variables on cognition (Tarone, 2010). In addition to the individual’s conscious awareness in input, social interaction, which bridges the social and the cognition, also influences the processing mechanism of language acquisition. Instead of intake, internalization is used in this figure to emphasize language learners’ mental processing process and the result. Interlanguage system is a term taken from SLA, indicating each individual’s unique language system, a system between the source language and the target language. Here, social interaction includes not only the oral interactions of listening and speaking in concrete contexts, but also the written interactions with the texts by the language learners in reading and writing.

### 1.3 Socio-Cognitive Approach

The Socio-cognitive approach holds that the social character is respected as a necessary aspect of human development, which reaps the benefits of both pragmatic views and cognitive views (Khatib & Shakouri, 2013). To Atkinson (2002), language never takes on an internal, truly mental function at all, it is always mutually, simultaneously, and co-constitutively in the head (cognitive) and in the world (social), and thus socio-cognitive approach views language and language acquisition as simultaneously occurring and interactively constructed both “in the head” and “in the world”. This differs from the socio-cultural view, which overemphasizes the facilitative role of the social factors upon the cognitive factors.

According to the socio-cognitive view, individuals’ intention is so essential that communication can be regarded as the result of the interplay of intention and attention motivated by the socio-cultural background. Based on this view, knowledge is neither imitated nor inborn, but is relatively constructed in the process of cooperative activities. In other words, learners do not simply internalize and appropriate the consequences of activities on the social plane, but also actively restructure their knowledge both with each other and within themselves (Steiner & Meehan, 2000).

Atkinson (2002) puts forward a bit more metaphorical view: the acts of cognition are substantially continuous

Compared with the mainstream cognition-based SLA, the two-dimensional Socio-cultural Theory regards language learning as a complex process, which can be explained by the Figure 2:

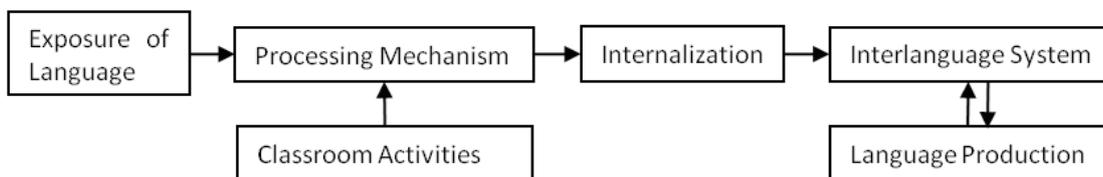
with the social world—they do not start in the head, although the head is certainly involved, nor do they end in the head, because the output is social action. Nor do the social (signifying) practices involved simply take on their meaning once they arrive in the head; instead, they come with meaning already built in their mind.

Cumming (2006) concurs with Atkinson’s (2002) argument that researches that deliberately link and explain theoretically the relations between social and cognitive phenomena in natural educational settings are necessary. Later, Atkinson (2010) proposes three principles of a socio-cognitive approach to SLA:

- The Inseparability Principle: mind, body, and world work together in SLA.
- The Learning-is-adaptive Principle: the main purpose of SLA /learning is to support adaptivity to complex and dynamic ecosocial environments.
- The Alignment Principle: the process by which we continuously adapt to our environment constitutes a major engine of SLA.

The term “adaptivity” in these three principles can find its source from the concepts of attention/noticing in mainstream/cognitivist SLA studies developed by Schmidt (1990, 2001). For Schmidt, noticing is the subjective correlate of attention, which is a collection of internal cognitive processes, and for (Atkinson, 2010), attention is adaptive, which connects minds via bodies to ecosocial worlds. Based on socio-cognitive approach, attention is socially tuned and socially constructed, which is more than the product of individual minds.

Therefore, it seems not necessary to make a distinction between the socio-culturally motivated studies and the socio-cognitive propelled studies. However, the differences in the studies under the two approaches may be explained as the following: Socio-culturally informed studies offer recommendations for improving classroom practice, in seeing learning as participation, as relational and interactive, and as constrained by unequal power relations (Zuengler & Miller, 2006); A socio-cognitive approach to SLA in classroom setting highlights the simultaneous relationship between the classroom activities and the individuals’ mental work and hence the constructive and reconstructive learning process. The socio-cognitive approach to SLA can be illustrated in the Figure 3:



**Figure 3**  
**Socio-cognitive approach to SLA**

Socio-cognitive approach to SLA in classroom setting contextualizes input as “exposure of language” and social interaction as “classroom activities”, with the former mainly referring to the teacher’s instruction or the availability of both the listening and reading materials and the latter including all the possible classroom activities like pair work and group discussion and so on. In other words, cooperative learning is expected and encouraged, though it may not achieve the higher expectation from both the students and the teachers because of its “dilemmatic nature” (Liang, 2004). Cooperative/collaborative learning should be better regarded as providing language learners a supportive environment beyond mere group work, in which the expected outcomes can be improved. Language production, in this figure, indicates both the oral production and the written production.

Socio-cognitive approach emphasizes the effective mutual influence between the mental factors and the social factors, with no distinction of their linear order. Social factors like the language learners’ interest, motivation, attitude, the learning environment and etc. would all influence their cognitive mechanism in either reading or writing. On the other hand, the cognitive mechanism activated by the relevant social factors would enhance the degree of the engagement of all the possible social factors.

## 2. APPROACHES TO SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING

Second Language Acquisition theories have provided the theoretical foundations for second language teaching. Based on these theories, the production-oriented-approach has been proposed and the reading-writing teaching mechanism has been constructed and reconstructed in the university settings of China.

### 2.1 Production-Oriented Approach

The Production-oriented Approach (POA), proposed by Wen (2015, 2016a), consists of three components: teaching principles; teaching hypotheses; and teacher-mediated teaching process. And the teaching hypotheses which function as the theoretical basis refer to output-driven, input-enabled, and selective learning. This emphasizes the importance as well as the relationship between input and output. And it also corresponds to the constructive view of language learning, because any

learning is selective. Based on this approach, writing after reading would facilitate language acquisition by driving the learners into conscious selecting of the needed information, idea or language form.

This approach has been applied in class as a new method of assessment (Wen, 2016b). According to this method, the assessment process can be divided into three phases: pre-class, in-class and post-class. Before class, the teacher is expected to select a few examples and critically review them based on the learning objectives of the unit. In class, students are encouraged to make critical comments on the selected samples independently, exchange their views in pairs/groups, and have teacher-guided discussion while the teacher may offer the revised version prepared in advance. After class, the students are required to revise their products through either self-assessment or peer assessment in the light of the teacher’s guided training provided in class. Here critical reviews, critical comments are required from either the teacher or the students.

### 2.2 Reading - Writing Teaching Mechanism

Contextualizing the language learning situation as well as the language proficiency of the learners, Wang and others have conducted a series of researches on the second language (L2) university students in China to delve deep into the effects of the “continuation task” in facilitating L2 learning and use. This task is, in effect, the writing activity after reading. Wang, Niu, and Zheng (2000) report on a one-semester-long experiment on improving Chinese-speaking EFL learners’ English by means of composition writing. The subjects are 201 English majors in their first year of study at Guangdong Foreign Studies University. Among the four criteria (length, organization, ideas and language), they emphasize length. Results show that the method of “writing long essays” is preferred by most of the students. Wang (2012) turns to combine reading and writing in language teaching, pointing out the advantages and disadvantages of this continuation task, with imitation as its focus. Wang and Yuan (2013) further confirm the success of that this task in language proficiency tests. Then Wang (2014) stress the special effect of alignment in the continuous task. By using the think-aloud method, Wang (2015) reports on a qualitative study looking into the L2 learning mechanism of the continuation task.

Wang (2016, 2017) has moved from write-to-learn to the recent theory of CEC (completion, extension and creation). The argument affords a new perspective for

probing the language learning process and its underlying mechanism, and for enhancing efficiency in improving language instruction and learning. The key elements in his CEC theory ask for the cooperation of reading comprehension and writing, and emphasize the facilitative or even the decisive role of the specific means of writing in language acquisition.

How to bridge the gap between input (reading) and output (writing) has always been regarded as an urgent necessity. Wang and others seem to propose that there is one negotiation place for the interaction between the same language learner under two identities, as a reader and as a writer. In this place, the reader/writer intends to fully understand the original meaning and then attempts to provide his own views, either by agreeing with the original writer or diverting from him/her. Without this meeting place, the learner's cognitive mechanism cannot be activated. Thus, this special way functions as the link of meanings.

## CONCLUSION

Language acquisition is a constructive process, in which different learners construct both their own interlanguage systems and their ideas. During the whole process, meaning construction is essential. Without it, both reading and writing would be meaningless. Because of this, the same exposure of language and the same learning environment may lead to different learning results. For language learners at any level, to achieve meaningful reading and writing, critical thinking is one indispensable element. Without it, input and output in any quality or quantity will not stimulate the language learners' mental work, and thus no language acquisition or idea formulation would occur. Without adequate critical thinking, students would not internalize both knowledge and language. The students are constructing their own language system while they are using the language completing all the activities. Exposure of language in any form to the students would be taken as language learning resources and processes.

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