

BOOK REVIEW



Review of *Researching and teaching second language writing in the digital age*

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Researching and teaching second language writing in the digital age

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Technology use in the second language (L2) classroom has become an integral fixture, and now more than ever both teachers and their students are expected to possess considerable technological literacy in order to function in a world that is highly digital in nature (Oskoz & Elola, 2020). The research landscape, too, is increasingly reflecting such societal changes, especially in the domain of L2 writing. Within this subdiscipline, topics such as multimodality, computer-mediated collaborative writing, and automated writing evaluation—the topic of this special issue—have grown exponentially in prominence over the past decade.

It is in response to this influx of research that Mimi Li (2021) has put forward a book-length effort titled *Researching and Teaching Second Language Writing in the Digital Age*. In the book, Li presents a state-of-the-art review of six key research topics, which illustrate the impact of digital technologies on various aspects of L2 writing. In particular, the book is intended to serve as “a comprehensive guide for L2 researchers and teachers” (p. 2), and primarily for those individuals who work within the field of applied linguistics. In an attempt to speak to researchers and teachers, Li organizes the internal structure of her text in a way that fosters connections between research and practice. The book consists of ten chapters. However, for the six content chapters that cover key topics, each chapter is comprised of four subsections, which include an introduction to the topic and important terms, key research texts published during the past decade (i.e., 2010–2020), future research directions, and teaching recommendations.

Chapter 1, *Introduction*, briefly outlines the subsequent chapters and previews the main ideas that will be discussed. Additionally, the introduction informs readers of the primary research gap to be explored throughout the text, which concerns highlighting the effects of different digital technologies on L2 writing. The chapter also emphasizes the book’s applicability to L2 instruction in formal educational settings.

Chapter 2, *New Landscape of L2 Writing and Theoretical Frameworks*, then presents a broad overview of

the progression of L2 writing over time and how digital advancements have impacted literacy, feedback, assessment, and even the identities of L2 writers. Li defines key terms that will appear throughout the rest of the text such as *digital literacies* and *synchronous and asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC)*. The chapter ends with a discussion of important theoretical frameworks that have been used to motivate much L2 writing research to date, such as Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978), Interactionist approaches (e.g., Long, 1996; Swain, 1993), and others.

Chapter 3, *Computer-Mediated Teacher Feedback (CMTF)*, is the first content chapter that dives into a specific research topic. In the chapter, Li defines and describes the various types of CMTF, including synchronous and asynchronous feedback, micro- and macro-level feedback, and direct and indirect feedback. The author then reviews prominent articles on the topic of CMTF (through a search of the [Google Scholar](#) database) and discusses themes related to CMTF, including attitudes and perceptions of CMTF in the classroom and students' uptake of teacher feedback. The key articles are organized and presented through a series of tables, a format that is carried through to subsequent chapters. When discussing key articles, Li provides information about each study's context, participants, the writing task used in the study, the theoretical framework, and the research questions. Based on the research review, the author then suggests that more research is needed on CMTF and on how teachers can apply it in their classrooms. In the next section, recommendations for teachers are provided, including instructions for using [Microsoft Teams](#) and other platforms to offer students corrective feedback. Additional means of providing feedback using different modes (e.g., written, audio, or video feedback) are also discussed.

In Chapter 4, *Computer-Mediated Peer Response (CMPR)*, Li begins by outlining the benefits of peer review and the advantages of online peer feedback compared to face-to-face feedback such as increased accessibility and reduced anxiety for students (see Liu & Edwards, 2018). CMPR is defined and influential research is illustrated through several tables. The key research is then categorized into prominent themes, such as different modes of peer feedback and the impact of CMPR on students' writing. Following this, research recommendations are given, such as additional studies that investigate peer review with students of different proficiency levels. In closing the chapter, pedagogical recommendations for CMPR are shared, including training students when engaging in peer response. Additionally, different applications and websites ideal for CMPR are listed for the reader to explore (e.g., [Peergrade](#) and [WeChat](#)).

Chapter 5, *Digital Multimodal Composing (DMC)*, opens with a discussion of instructors' and researchers' expanding interest in multimodal writing practices (see Lim & Kessler, 2022), which enable writers to employ linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, and spatial resources to create meaning. Li distinguishes between multimodality and DMC, in which DMC is regarded as an essential element of L2 writing classrooms. In particular, the author argues that DMC provides L2 writers various options for personal expression and wide-ranging opportunities to learn. Li presents key texts in the area and breaks these texts down into four themes: (a) DMC processes, (b) students' perspectives, (c) teachers' perspectives, and (d) learning and outcome development. Following this, research recommendations are made for expanding research agendas to include more quantitative or mixed methods research. Next, teaching recommendations for using DMC are provided, with suggestions for tasks like using digital documentaries and infographics. Applications and websites for implementing DMC are also listed, such as [Canva](#), [Glogster](#), and [WordPress](#).

The popular topic of collaborative writing specifically within the context of CMC is the focus of Chapter 6, *Computer-Mediated Collaborative Writing (CMCW)*. In this chapter, Li provides a detailed account of prior research that supports utilizing CMCW in the classroom and summarizes 16 major studies published within the past ten years through a series of tables. The identified themes pertain to investigations of interaction and the writing process, the written product/outcome, factors influencing CMCW, and students' perceptions. Regarding further L2 research, Li predicts that CMCW will continue to receive great interest, but more studies are needed that explore its use in K-12 contexts. As with other chapters, Chapter 6 concludes with pedagogical recommendations (e.g., considering pair and small group

configurations) and representative technology resources, such as [Etherpad](#), [PBWorks](#), and others.

In Chapter 7, *Automated Writing Evaluation* (AWE) is discussed, which many previous studies have often referred to as automated essay scoring. Li notes that AWE has improved greatly since the 1960s due to advancements in automated features, including graphic organizers, personal progress reports, and evaluative feedback, making it an ideal learning tool. In exploring its relevance to L2 learning, the author highlights numerous key articles and discusses the main themes, including the validity of AWE, perceptions of AWE, the impact of AWE, and factors influencing students' and instructors' use. In discussing the research directions, Li highlights the lack of research on languages other than English, as most of the research on AWE has been conducted in either ESL or EFL contexts. The chapter ends with pedagogical recommendations (e.g., considerations when selecting AWE tools) and a list of AWE resources such as [Criterion](#), [Turnitin](#), and [Writing Pal](#).

Chapter 8, *Corpus Analysis and Corpus-Based Writing Instruction*, is the final content chapter of the book that discusses how corpora can be useful tools which enable students to engage in data-driven learning (DDL) and to self-evaluate their own writing through making cross-comparisons with other texts. In moving to key research studies, Li outlines 13 texts related to corpus approaches in L2 writing contexts. The key themes of these texts consist of corpus analysis of textual features of writing, corpus-based instruction of L2 writing, learner-corpus interaction, the effects of DDL on genre learning and/or writing development, and users' perceptions. Research directions for corpus-based writing instruction are given, including increasing the number of longitudinal studies. As a final note, teaching recommendations are detailed such as training learners to use different corpora, along with a list of corpus resources (e.g., [BLC](#), [COCA](#), and [MICUSP](#)).

Chapter 9, called *Resources*, moves on to provide a series of diverse scholarly resources, such as books, journals, and websites. These resources are described in great detail for use in educational contexts. Additionally, many of the websites, texts, and applications selected are free to use and easily accessible. Chapter 9 is meant to serve as a reference for exploring many of the chapter topics beyond the book itself. Importantly, it also serves as a professional development resource by enabling readers to learn more about conferences and training opportunities.

The final chapter, *Conclusion*, recaps the main ideas presented throughout the book. Two figures are integrated into this chapter. The first figure graphically expresses the interaction of teachers, students, and technology in digital L2 writing classrooms. The second figure serves to illustrate the general contents that were covered in the book and how they interconnect. Furthermore, overall limitations to the book are discussed. Li ends with concluding remarks about the growing field of L2 digital writing and highlights her hope that this book will serve as a foundation for scholars to further explore and embrace digital writing.

In its totality, Li's book is an excellent resource for those in applied linguistics, education, or composition-related fields who are interested in exploring L2 writing, CALL, and especially the intersection of the two. In particular, graduate students and faculty will find the text to be a useful starting point for exploring major topics that have gained increasing prominence during the past decade. One of the major strengths of the book is the internal structure of the six content chapters, which are easy-to-follow, since they are organized chronologically along a research timeline. This format and flow help aid comprehension when reading about the key texts that are discussed, and it also helps to illuminate the connections and themes that underpin those published studies.

While the text itself is largely useful, one criticism pertains to the scope of the studies included in the review of research. Although Li's text provides a high-level overview of various topics and current research trends, it does not give readers an in-depth view of individual topics and how they have evolved over time. For instance, in providing overviews and selecting texts, Li limited the scope of her search to the decade span of 2010–2020. As Li points out in the introduction, it was not her intent to provide a longitudinal account of different topics. However, due to the scope of the search, prominent texts are

occasionally omitted from each chapter, especially when it comes to popular topics that predate 2010 (e.g., CMTF and CMCW).

Apart from this minor criticism, we highly recommend Li's book. As mentioned, it will be especially helpful for graduate students who are interested in conducting research in the areas of L2 writing and digital composition. Likewise, many teachers will find it to be a useful resource. Li not only provides the audience with practical pedagogical implications, but, importantly, she also offers them concrete suggestions for exploring different tools, platforms, and resources. In sum, Li's book makes a valuable contribution to the field and stands out as a unique piece of literature in the marketplace.

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