What does the linguistics research show about ELL writing?


(1) Discourse organization

Based on research in similar genres, L2 writers:

1) construct or place thesis statements differently, as well as omitting them altogether;

2) take a logically and conceptually different approach to rhetorical development, argumentation, persuasion, and exposition/narration;

3) often neglect to account for counterarguments and to anticipate audience reactions;

4) support their arguments and claims by means of statements of personal opinions and beliefs in lieu of more substantive information;

5) significantly more often leave their argumentation unsupported;

6) sequence ideas and explanatory information differently: the norms of rhetorical structuring of discourse often do not conform to those expected in comparable written genres in English;

7) construct less fluent and less detailed/explanatory prose;

8) produce shorter and less elaborated texts;

9) rely more on personal opinions and include less fact-based evidence in argumentation and exposition;

10) over- or under-estimate the amount of readers’ background knowledge and the need for textual clarity, explicitness, and specificity;

11) differently orient the reader to the content, as well as differently introduce and develop topics;

12) delay or omit thesis/main point statements, and also omit or dramatically shorten conclusions/closings (e.g. one-sentence closings, as in: Hopefully, scientists will find a solution to this problem soon.);

13) employ different strategies for extracting/citing information from sources, as well as
paraphrasing, quoting, and including source material in their writing;

14) develop text cohesion differently, with weak lexical/semantic ties and theme connections, and a preponderance of overt discourse-level conjunctions;

15) rely on different given–new (theme–rheme) idea development;

16) use different sequencing, parsing, ordering, and connecting paragraph divisions, e.g., in some cases, such as those found in academic essays, L2 paragraphs need to be re-organized or divided into shorter ones, or short paragraphs need to be combined into longer ones;

17) differently—and often inconsistently—establish text cohesion: less frequent and less dense usage of cohesion devices, such as lexical, discoursal, and referential cohesive ties;

18) rely on repetition in order to paraphrase or establish cohesion at rates twice as high as those found in L1 writing;

19) develop prose that is oblique (e.g., hints) and vague (e.g., questions and allusions in lieu of direct statements);

20) often take moralistic and emotionally appealing approaches to argumentation and persuasion

(2) Grammar and vocabulary

L2 texts, when compared to L1 texts:

1) exhibit less lexical variety and sophistication;

2) contain significantly fewer idiomatic and collocational expressions;

3) have smaller lexical density and lexical specificity, and more frequent vocabulary misuses;

4) rely on shorter sentences and clauses with fewer words per clause and fewer words (e.g., nouns and modifiers) per verb;

5) involve high rates of incomplete or inaccurate sentences (e.g., missing sentence subjects or verbs, incomplete verb phrases, sentence fragments);

6) repeat content words more often (i.e., nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs);

7) provide twice as many simple paraphrases or avoid paraphrasing altogether with a preponderance of referential pronouns (e.g., this, that, it);

8) use shorter words (fewer words with two or more syllables), more conversational and high frequency words (e.g., good, bad, ask, talk);
9) incorporate fewer modifying and descriptive prepositional phrases, as well as a higher rate of misused prepositions;

10) employ less subordination and two to three times more coordination.

_L2 texts also employ:_

11) fewer passive constructions;

12) fewer lexical (e.g., adjectives and adverbs) and syntactic modifiers (e.g., subordinate clauses) of sentences, nouns, and verbs;

13) inconsistent uses of verb tenses;

14) more emotive and private verbs (e.g., _believe, feel, think_);

15) significantly higher rates of personal pronouns (e.g., _I, we, he_) and lower rates of impersonal/referential pronouns (e.g., _it, this, one_);

16) markedly fewer abstract and interpretive nouns, and nominalizations (e.g., _rotation, cognition, analysis_);

17) fewer adverbial modifiers and adverbial clauses;

18) fewer epistemic and possibility hedges (e.g., _apparently, perhaps_) and more conversational hedges (e.g., _sort of, in a way_);

19) more conversational intensifiers, emphatics, exaggeratives, and overstatements (e.g., _totally, always, huge, for sure_);

20) fewer downtoners (e.g., _almost, hardly_);

21) more lexical softening devices (e.g., _maybe_).