

JAN ZALEWSKI
University of Opole

IMMEDIATE VERSUS DISPLACED CONSCIOUSNESS IN WRITING: AN EFL STUDENT'S PROBLEM WITH A WRITING TASK

In language acquisition literature, the closeness language may have to its immediate context of situation is referred to as *contextualized* or *situated* use of language. In this sense, *contextualization/situatedness* is characteristic of spoken language and its corresponding type of consciousness/cognition, which may be called *situated-immediate*. Such situated cognition is understood as the closeness cognition may have to the immediate physical and social situation of the thinker. However, the term *situated* has in fact much broader meaning and is typically used to characterize all human cognition. Thus, it does not mean closeness to our physical-social situation in the sense of our immediate interaction with it, because human cognition/consciousness is frequently *displaced*. Written language calls for such a displaced mode of cognitive operation. The paper offers an analysis of a problem an EFL student has with a writing assignment. The analysis is based on the distinction between immediate consciousness, (characteristic of oral use of language) and displaced consciousness (typical of literate use of language and associated with an increase in metacognitive control). The analysis presented here can help us design better writing tasks, which are more adequate for developing advanced/academic literacy skills of our students.

1. Introduction

In a writing class I thought using the multiple-draft process-oriented approach (Zalewski 2001), I asked my second-year students to write a position paper in which they were to formulate an anti-cheating policy to be followed in our university. The assignment asked them to consider such points as (a) a definition and types of cheating, in order to make clear what counts as cheating in the academic context; (b) explain why cheating is wrong; and (c) state the appropriate penalties for the different kinds of cheating. Thus, it asked for a formal policy statement. Virtually all the students had a problem meeting this basic requirement, that is,

making their paper a formal policy statement. Instead, their papers tended to turn into general discussions and condemnations of cheating, often focusing on the problem of bribery, and finally discussing “the rampant corruption in our country.” In one case, even though the student focused his discussion on cheating in the academic context, he ultimately proceeded to justify student cheating, apparently disregarding what the assignment was asking for. In fact, this was a student who had been caught cheating on a previous assignment. Generating content in answer to this assignment, he came up with a list of possible excuses a student might have for cheating. This apparent disregard for task requirements may be viewed as his emotionally blocking out that it was to be an *anti*-cheating policy statement, which asked for condemnation and not for justification of cheating.

This student’s case demonstrates what for example Bruner (1986: 117) has argued, namely, that “cognition is not a form of pure knowing to which emotion is added.” In other words, our affective states in crucial ways interact with our construction of conceptual content. As this example indicates, the process of writing in the sense of an *epistemic* process of generating conceptual content (and thus a process of *getting to know*) is crucially dependent on the writer’s awareness of a *context of knowing*—in this case, clearly an emotionally charged context. The student-writer’s previous experience which is made relevant to the task by the still strong emotions has influence on what conceptual content is generated. Two researchers of the writing process Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) have shown that learning to write involves acquiring metacognitive control over the meaning making process. In this paper, I explain acquiring metacognitive control in writing as increasing our appreciation for how our awareness of a context of knowing affects what meanings we come to produce in writing. This need for a greater control of a context of knowing in writing is explained here as a consequence of writing being *desituated* (Chafe 1994) in a way that speaking is not.

2. Basic terms: The theoretical framework

I need to make a few preliminary remarks concerning my terminology. The term *context* in my notion of *context of knowing* refers to a set of cognitive constraints in constructing conceptual content (Zalewski 2006). To explain the process of writing, I employ the basic connectionist idea that meaning making comes about through an interplay of multiple sources of knowledge (contexts of knowing) acting as simultaneous constraints on one another (Rumelhart and McClelland 1986). I classify such constraints in writing into two categories. Namely, writing can be seen as a process of constructing conceptual content out of subconceptual microfeatures by configuring them into a conceptual knowledge network. Such a conceptual knowledge network can be seen as configured in terms of a simultaneously activated *context of knowing*, that is, the larger connectivity pattern within which the conceptual knowledge network is constructed. In this way, I group mental representations into two kinds of mutual simultaneous constraints

operating in the process of writing: *internal* and *external* constraints or contexts. This distinction between the external and internal context of knowing is obviously continuous rather than discrete and it is to be understood in terms of such continua of cognition as (a) the distinction between *conscious* and *nonconscious* representations, which is drawn in terms of high versus low activation levels respectively, the resulting degree of our awareness of the contexts ranging from focal to peripheral (see, e.g., Chafe 1994); and (b) the distinction between *implicit* and *explicit* representations which is drawn in terms of stimulus-driven versus concept-driven processing respectively (see, e.g., Roediger and McDermott 1993). This continuum from nonconscious, implicit, stimulus-driven through conscious, explicit, concept-driven cognition corresponds to the distinction between different knowledge types: from affective and sociocultural representing the implicit end through conceptual and metacognitive representing the explicit end (see, e.g., Alexander, Schallert, and Hare 1991). Other continua in terms of which the distinction between the internal and external contexts of knowing can be drawn include such dimensions of cognition as Bialystok and Ryan's (1985) *unanalyzed* versus *analyzed* knowledge or Schmidt's (1990) awareness continuum ranging from *perceiving*, through *noticing*, to *understanding*.

While the internal context of knowing is explicitly constructed in terms of conceptual knowledge, the external context of knowing is either implicitly constructed in terms of sociocultural and affective knowledge or explicitly constructed in terms of conceptual and metacognitive knowledge. I refer to the implicit construction of a context of knowing as constructing the *writing situation*, which is the result of *immediate consciousness* (to be discussed in section 3), and to the explicit construction of a context of knowing as constructing the *rhetorical situation*, which is the result of *displaced consciousness*. The interactions between the internal and external contexts of knowing may take the form of automatic adaptations, which is the case of our student – an immature writer. Then, the construction of conceptual meaning is subject mainly to implicit sociocultural and affective constraints and the writer cannot fully control what conceptual content he is generating. In the case of a mature writing process, the construction of conceptual meaning is subjected to metacognitive constraints in the form of the explicitly constructed external context (i.e., the rhetorical situation), and so is more under the writer's control.

The high-activated, explicit, conceptual representations constitute the internal context of knowing which occupies the center of our consciousness in the process of generating content in writing. From time to time, metacognitive/rhetorical concerns (such as consideration of purpose, audience, appropriate strategies) may be brought into the writer's internal context of knowing to constrain subsequent construction of conceptual content. That is, when the activation of these metacognitive concerns subsides, they retreat into the external context of knowing still affecting later construction of conceptual content. Included in the external context of knowing and so always affecting construction of conceptual content is affective knowledge, in keeping with the already quoted statement that "cognition is

not a form of pure knowing to which emotion is added” (Bruner 1986: 117). The crucial point is that like the internal context of knowing, the external context of knowing is also defined as mental representations; however, we are only peripherally aware of this external context, being engaged in constructing conceptual content (in accordance with my definition of the two types of contexts in terms of activation levels). It follows that, as mental representations, the external context is also subject to mental construction. The key difference between the two contexts of knowing is that while the internal context involves exclusively explicit/conceptual construction, the construction of the external context can range from more implicit/uncontrolled, carried out in terms of affective and sociocultural knowledge, to more explicit/controlled, carried out in terms of cognitive and metacognitive knowledge. The presence of metacognitive concerns is a sign of the rhetorical approach to meaning making in writing. Within this framework, a *rhetorical situation* is defined as that part of the external context of thinking in writing that has been explicitly constructed in terms of conceptual and metacognitive knowledge. Such metacognitive knowledge ultimately produces conscious awareness of a context of situation as a complex of entities and relations purposefully constructed by the writer as opposed to implicitly constructed in terms of affective and sociocultural knowledge only – the latter case producing no more than awareness of the immediate context of situation as a complex of objective (writer-independent) entities and relations.

3. Immediate and displaced consciousness: Analysis of the writer’s problem

I draw the distinction between the *desituatedness* of writing and *situatedness* of speaking following Chafe (1994), who accordingly distinguishes between two types of consciousness, namely, *immediate consciousness* made possible by the situatedness of speaking and so typical of oral use of language, and *displaced consciousness* required by the desituatedness of writing and so characteristic of literate use of language. Desituatedness of writing, as Chafe explains, means lack of copresence and immediate interaction between text producer and receiver. It is desituatedness in this sense which accounts for why writing tends to be perceived as an individual, solitary, and even asocial act. Written language being transferable through time and space is directly dependent on the minimal influence that the environment and circumstances of language production and reception have on the language and consciousness itself. However, as Chafe (1994: 44) observes, “writing sacrifices the benefits of copresence.” By the benefits he means closeness and immediate interaction which give rise to what he calls *situatedness* – in language acquisition literature, also referred to as *contextualized use of language* (see, e.g., Cummins 1991). Chafe (1994: 44) defines *situatedness* as “the closeness language has to the immediate physical and social situation in which it is produced and received.” According to him, such situatedness characterizes spoken

language as well as the corresponding type of consciousness, called *immediate consciousness*. Chafe's understanding of *situatedness* cannot be taken as characteristic of human cognition in general then but of one type of cognition only. Such cognition, which I will call *situated-immediate*, might accordingly be defined as the closeness cognition may have to the immediate physical and social situation of the thinker. Understood in this sense, the term *situated-immediate cognition* can be applied to the writing process of our student-writer (see section 1). We can clearly see the influence that the classroom environment, the immediate circumstances of text production have on his text. In spite of what the task actually demands of him, he engages in defending student cheating, evidently situating his argument in the immediate context of his classroom interaction with the teacher and his recent experience of being caught cheating by this teacher. However, like all typical writing tasks, this one represents a case of desituatedness and so calls for the displaced rather than the immediate mode of cognitive operation.

Although Chafe's (1994) immediate and displaced consciousness are characteristic of speaking and writing respectively, they refer to two different modes of cognition which may as well be expected to underlie two ways of making meaning in writing, that is, two ways of *composing*. Such a distinction between two fundamentally different composing processes was first proposed by the already mentioned cognitivists Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987). Their immature type of composing, called *knowledge telling*, is in fact a writing process dependent on immediate consciousness, while their mature composing process, called *knowledge transforming*, can be explained as dependent on displaced consciousness. In their view, the progression from knowledge telling (the immature type) to knowledge transforming (the mature type) involves acquiring metacognitive control over the meaning making process. I am going to explain this acquisition of metacognitive control as increase in our appreciation for how our awareness of a context of knowing affects what conceptual content we produce.

As has already been noticed, the need for a greater control of a context of knowing in writing is a consequence of writing being greater desituated in the sense of the lack of copresence and immediate interaction between text producer and receiver. To explain the problem of the student writer under discussion here, we need to take a closer look at what it means that desituatedness of writing calls for the displaced rather than the immediate mode of cognitive operation. As we can see on the example of the student, it is his dependence on situated-immediate cognition (a defining feature of the immature, arhetorical type of composing) that leads him to ground his argument within the immediate classroom context of teacher-student interaction, and so to produce content which doesn't meet the requirements of the task. Composing as an epistemic process of generating conceptual content is crucially dependent on the writer's awareness of a context of knowing. In this case, we can see the closeness the writer's composing process has to the immediate situation. To better explain the writer's immediate mode of cognitive operation as dependence on an implicit construction of the external context of knowing in contrast to the displaced mode (required in writing) as de-

pendence on an explicit construction of the external context, again I avail myself of the connectionist and specifically the parallel distributed processing (PDP) account of human cognition.

In contrast to traditional cognitivism, connectionist approaches to cognition claim to possess greater neural plausibility, being motivated by the recognition that the brain is a neural network. Accordingly, I take the view of cognition (and so of composing) as flow of energy through neural networks, with the patterns of neural activity (a) resulting in specific cognitive-affective states and (b) being dependent on structural changes in neural connections due to recurring interactions with environment. A single most important feature of the connectionist approach to modeling cognition is that it is not symbolic but subsymbolic, meaning that it deconstructs concepts into smaller units called *microfeatures* (Rumelhart and McClelland 1986), which are too small to be meaningful by themselves and whose cumulative meaning ultimately depends on the pattern of connectivity within which they are being activated. It is the subconceptual level of analysis which accounts for the greater flexibility of the connectionist paradigm in modeling cognitive performance (Smolensky 1987). Cognitive competencies (including writing), which are traditionally regarded as conceptual, require a subconceptual level of analysis. In the subsymbolic paradigm, any bit of knowledge is distributed across a large number of processing units. In contrast to the subsymbolic *distributed* network, the symbolic *localist* network imposed *hard constraints* on cognitive operations (Bechtel and Abrahamsen 1991). For example, if a writer was thinking a concept, the entire concept was assumed to be activated as an intact symbolic unit according to a rule-governed decision based on whether or not all the singly necessary and jointly sufficient conditions were present. Thus, if the concept was present, all its defining attributes had to be present as well (according to the classical view of categorization). By contrast, in a subsymbolic distributed network, if the same concept is being processed, a large and varying number of independent and partly idiosyncratic microfeatures are being activated in various degrees, with the result being that some features may not be sufficiently activated to rise to the level of consciousness. Which features do rise to the level of consciousness on a given occasion depends in the main on the larger pattern of connectivity (the context) within which the given concept is being activated. In other words, the meaning of this concept will vary with context (e.g., the meaning of *ball* when the immediate context of situation is sports versus dancing). The subsymbolic system is said to impose less rigid conditions on the activation of concepts, which makes them more sensitive and adaptive to different contexts of use. This characteristic of the PDP architecture is what is referred to as its ability to work within *soft constraints*, and it is of fundamental value in the context of our discussion of writing in that it accounts for the context-sensitive nature of meaning making as a *constructive* act. What connectionist theory tells us is that even the most conventionalized units of meaning like lexicalized concepts do not exist as prefabricated symbolic units of knowledge stored away in memory but rather are constructed anew every time we process them. Which microfeatures making up a concept are

activated (and brought to consciousness) depends on the larger connectivity pattern within which the concept is being activated.

Such context sensitivity of our mental representations is what connectionists call *tunability* of mental representations to changing environments (Hinton, McClelland, and Rumelhart 1986). These environments or contexts of knowing are themselves to be understood also as mental representations, which is of enormous epistemological consequence (heeded in enactivist theories of cognition). Again, let's take a look at the immature composing process of our student writer, a process involving situated-immediate cognition. The closeness such cognition has to the immediate situation means that it is supported by stimulus-driven processing of the environment. Such processing can facilitate mutual understanding, that is, can activate mental representations in similar ways for both the language producer and receiver, provided they are co-present and share enough sociocultural experience. Stimulus-driven processing is *implicit* (Roediger and McDermott 1993), that is, takes place below the level of conscious awareness and so is beyond our control, but still it is subject to sociocultural norms (cf. Maturana and Varela's 1978 argument that all cognitive processes develop in social interaction, that is, we constantly adjust our cognitive processes to those of others in recurrent interactions which lead to social *structural coupling*). The awareness that is the end result of such implicit, stimulus-driven processing of the environment is an awareness of a situation perceived as objective, knower-independent, and deterministic in the sense of requiring a specific response. Our student writer is dependent on such implicit awareness of his *writing situation* as involving himself as a student, the teacher, and the topic being cheating makes the recent incident which took place between them directly relevant. Thus, the student feels obliged to respond in his writing to such an implicitly construed situation by trying to justify cheating. What is important is that such an immature writing process is a direct and automatic response to a writing situation that is implicitly constructed, that is, based on stimulus-driven processing of the immediate situation, so based on immediate consciousness.

The term *context sensitivity* of mental representations is not to be understood only in this passive sense of appropriately responding to an implicitly construed context of knowing (with the writing situation perceived as objectively given and deterministic in the sense of requiring a specific response). *Context sensitivity* must be understood also in the active sense of our constructing (often referred to as *interpreting*) the context of situation and being more aware of this process (Zalewski 2006). Such active context sensitivity in effect means ability to take pre-emptive action against automatic tunability of mental representations to current constraints provided by immediate consciousness. Such pre-emptive action means explicit and purposive construction of a context of knowing in contrast to the implicit awareness of a writing situation, based on stimulus-driven processing. Since mental representations are so tunable to the currently active constraints, in other words, since the larger connectivity pattern within which a mental representation is activated affects the specific activation levels of the microfeatures within

the representation and so determines which part of the mental representation is brought to consciousness, in mature writing the pre-emptive action against this automatic tuning process takes the form of explicit rather than implicit construction of a context of knowing. *Explicit* means *concept-driven processing* rather than *stimulus-driven processing* (Roediger and McDermott 1993). I have referred to the implicitly constructed context of knowing as the *writing situation*. Awareness of a writing situation (involving stimulus-driven processing and immediate consciousness) is what automatically triggers an immature composing process, which means that the construction of conceptual content takes place within an implicitly constructed context of knowing. Since the context (as implicit) is constructed beyond the writer's control, we can see in the case of our student writer that he doesn't really control his construction of conceptual content and so defends student cheating in a paper which is supposed to be an anti-cheating policy statement.

In contrast to the implicit construction of a writing situation by immature writers (the result of stimulus-driven processing and immediate consciousness), the mature composing process starts with explicit, concept-driven construction of a context of knowing, then called the *rhetorical situation* in contrast to the *writing situation*. The rhetorical situation is purposefully constructed by the writer who at some level of awareness appreciates the fact that what conceptual content we generate as writers depends on how we construct our context of knowing, involving first of all our purpose in writing and our audience. Accordingly, I explain the displaced mode of cognitive operation as one involving explicit, concept-driven processing in constructing a context of knowing. Such explicit construction of a context of knowing becomes the crucial preliminary step leading to more aware, controlled construction of conceptual content. The displaced mode of cognitive functioning requires a certain minimal level of metacognitive awareness, or what I refer to as our appreciation for how a context of knowing affects construction of content. Production of desirable conceptual content in composing can be guaranteed by conscious selection of key concepts related to purpose and audience in writing, which is called *planning* a rhetorical situation (cf. Hayes and Nash 1996). This metacognitive mode (i.e., aware selection of cognitive constraints as preliminary to producing conceptual content) is made indispensable in composing written texts by the desituatedness of written language, when the immediate situation of text production and reception has minimal influence on our consciousness, and when stimulus-driven processing interferes with rather than supports our construction of conceptual content.

4. Pedagogical implications

I have offered an explanation of the difficulty a student writer had meeting the objectives of an assignment requiring him to write an anti-cheating policy statement to be addressed to an academic audience. The explanation is based on the

claim that writing as desituated calls for the displaced mode of cognitive operation. The analysis presented here has implications for constructing writing assignments. First and foremost, if teaching to compose involves developing metacognitive control over constructing conceptual content independently of an immediate context of situation, writing instruction cannot be reduced to assigning topics and requiring students to simply write. Our student writer, focusing on the topic of student cheating, produced inappropriate content because he functioned in the situated-immediate mode of cognition. To help students switch to the displaced mode required by the desituatedness of written language, writing teachers need to present their students with not just topics but well-designed writing tasks cuing them to construct their rhetorical situations. A good writing assignment must help students to relinquish their dependence on their writing situation, which is implicitly constructed. I have contrasted *the writing situation* (as implicitly constructed, based on stimulus-driven processing of the immediate situation) with *the rhetorical situation* (as explicitly constructed, based on concept-driven processing of selected aspects of a problem situation). To immature student writers, their writing situation interpreted in terms of the implicit social context becomes *the* objective writing situation involving themselves as students writing for a teacher, and for a grade, which requires them to say everything they know on the topic. A good assignment must help them see the writing task in terms other than student-teacher interaction (the immediate physical and social context). Their construction of an alternative context of knowing will be facilitated if their writing is exercised as part of some recognizable social practice.

In the assignment presented here, the students are led into an explicit analysis of the rhetorical-problem situation and made to *identify* and *define* their purpose as warning university students against cheating. (*Identifying* and *defining* are included among metacognitive skills involved in problem solving performance, see, e.g., Davidson, Deuser, and Sternberg 1994). This writing purpose defines their audience as the academic community. It may be seen as a weakness that the assignment contextualizes the writing task in the academic community because it may easily allow for implicit construction of the student-teacher relation. However, this is a problem of all academic writing assignments – that they allow for implicit construction of the student-teacher relation. In fact, the anti-cheating assignment requires the students to act in a role which is new for them, that of a policy-maker. For students to learn academic discourse means to learn to speak with authority and not from a subordinate position of a novice in the community (Graff 1999). Actually, the anti-cheating assignment requires the student writer not to speak from the subordinate position of a student, but to assume a role of authority and present the anti-cheating policy to the university community. This move to a new role requires displaced consciousness and is what turned out to be difficult for the students. It is very revealing that they all limited themselves to saying what the appropriate punishment for cheating should be, evidently assuming they can only make suggestions and lack the power to make policy decisions. The assignment requires students to speak with authority in the academic com-

munity, which is what we require from our students when we expect them to write academic discourse.

References

- Alexander, P.A., D.L. Schallert, and U.C. Hare. (1991). Coming to terms: how researchers in learning and literacy talk about knowledge. *Review of Educational Research* 61. 315-43.
- Bechtel, W., and A. Abrahamsen. (1991). *Connectionism and the mind: an introduction to parallel processing in networks*. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Bereiter, C., and M. Scardamalia, (1987). *The psychology of written composition*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Bialystok, E., and E.B. Ryan. (1985). A metacognitive framework for the development of first and second language skills. *Metacognition, cognition, and human performance: Vol. 1. Theoretical perspectives*, ed. by D. Forrest-Pressley, G. MacKinnon, and T. Waller, 207-52. New York: Academic Press.
- Bruner, J.S. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Chafe, W. (1994). *Discourse, consciousness, and time: the flow and displacement of conscious experience in speaking and writing*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cummins, J. (1991). Interdependence of first- and second-language proficiency in bilingual children. *Language proficiency in bilingual children*, ed. by E. Bialystok, 70-89. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Davidson, J.É., R. Deuser, and R.J. Sternberg (1994). The role of metacognition in problem solving. *Metacognition: knowing about knowing*, ed. by J. Metcalfe and A.P. Shimamura, 207-26. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Flower, L. (1994). *The construction of negotiated meaning: a social cognitive theory of writing*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Graff, G. (1999). The academic language gap. *Clearing House* 72. 140-45.
- Hayes, J.R., and J.G. Nash (1996). On the nature of planning in writing. *The Science of writing: theories, methods, individual differences, and applications*, ed. by C.M. Levy and S. Ransdell, 29-55. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Hinton, G.E., J.L. McClelland, and D.E. Rumelhart (1986). *Distributed representations. Parallel distributed processing: explorations in the microstructure of cognition: Vol. 1. Foundations*, ed. by D.E. Rumelhart and J.L. McClelland, 77-109. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Maturana, H., and F.J. Varela (1987). *The tree of knowledge: the biological roots of human understanding*. Boston: New Science Library.
- Roediger, H.L., and K.B. McDermott (1993). Implicit memory in normal human subjects. *Handbook of neuropsychology: Vol. 8*, ed. by F. Boller and J. Grafman, 63-131. Amsterdam: Elsevier.
- Rumelhart, D.E., and J.L. McClelland. (eds.) (1986). *Parallel distributed processing: explorations in the microstructure of cognition: Vol. 1. Foundations*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Schmidt, R. (1990). The role of consciousness in second language learning. *Applied Linguistics* 11, 129-58.

- Shaughnessy, M. (1977). *Errors and expectations: a guide for the teacher of basic writing*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Smolensky, P. (1987). The constituent structure of connectionist mental states. *The Southern Journal of Philosophy: Supplement* 26. 137-61.
- Zalewski, J. (2001). Teaching and learning to revise: a rationale for a process-oriented writing assignment. *Research on foreign language acquisition*, ed. by J. Arabski, 33-39. Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.
- Zalewski, J. (2006, June 12). The self and contexts of knowing in writing. *Zeitschrift Schreiben: Schreiben in Schule, Hochschule und Beruf*. Retrieved June 22, 2006, from http://www.zeitschrift-schreiben.eu/Beitraege/zalewski_Self_Contexts.pdf