WORKING MEMORY AND SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

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KEY TERMS

Working memory

A cognitive system that allows simultaneous processing, retention, and storage of information during ongoing tasks

WHAT EVIDENCE IS SUMMARISED?

16 studies

WHAT CAN I LEARN FROM THIS RESEARCH?

How can different types of working memory affect L2 writing development and performance?

CONTEXT & PROFICIENCY

L2 and FL learners in schools, universities, and adult learners

WHAT DOES IT FIND?

- Working memory affects writing more over time than in the moment, especially helping with language development and planning, but does not always impact immediate writing quality, especially in untimed tasks.
- Different types of memory support different writing skills e.g., verbal memory helps with sentence building and complex language, visual memory helps with idea generation, and spatial memory aids in organising thoughts.
- Writing performance varies by skill level and task type. Beginner writers rely more on visual memory, while advanced writers use both visual and phonological memory. Memory also helps more with expository writing than with narrative or argumentative writing.
- Good focus and control over distractions improve writing, helping writers stay on task, use feedback effectively, and be less influenced by their first language when writing in a second language.

HOW CAN I USE THE FINDINGS IN MY PRACTICE?

- It may be helpful to focus on building language gradually, using activities like reading, vocabulary work, and structured writing tasks. Visual aids could support lower-level learners, while more advanced students might benefit from exercises that develop lexical range and paraphrasing skills.
- Teachers might consider introducing various planning strategies for both timed and untimed writing, such as outlining for exams and helping students organise ideas for longer writing tasks.
- To ease cognitive load, it could be useful to break writing into manageable steps like brainstorming, outlining, and revising and to create a focused classroom environment, possibly incorporating strategies like timed writing or mindfulness to support student concentration.