



DIFFICULTIES FACED BY EIGHTH AND NINTH SEMESTER STUDENTS OF THE  
PROGRAM TITLED LICENCIATURA EN LENGUAS MODERNAS IN  
UNIVERSIDAD DEL CAUCA WHEN WRITING THEIR FINAL RESEARCH PAPER

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UNIVERSIDAD ICESI  
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MASTER'S PROGRAM IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH  
AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE  
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MASTER'S REPORT

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper wants to explore the difficulties faced by a group of eighth and ninth semester university students in the English writing process and production of their final research paper. The collected data which included focal groups with both groups and interviews with their research tutors, shows critical problems of composition, structure and coherence. In addition, these difficulties were found highly related to the process of translation and the cultural, linguistic and technical interlanguage aspects.

**Key words:** writing difficulties, writing process, translation, interlanguage.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

This work starts from my interest in the learning of languages, especially English as a foreign language, as a vehicle of meaning and sense negotiation. Foreign language learning, as every other human learning process, generates new cognitive scenarios with different challenges for learners. These difficulties are encountered in all aspects of language learning, but this study will focus on difficulties faced in foreign language writing. While writing, learners experience difficulties while adapting to the new linguistic input and assimilating language rules and writing conventions. These difficulties can be identified, categorized and analyzed in order to formulate some mechanism to improve the language learning process.

In this research study, I will explore and present the difficulties experienced by university students during the writing of their final research paper before they graduate.

The study will aim to categorize and analyze the difficulties in relation with a theoretical framework which explores writing as a complex process and the relation between the first and the foreign language.

This work also reflects the contributions of the different courses of this Master's program to my comprehension of cultural, linguistic and psychological aspects involved in the learning of English as a foreign language. In addition, the study has allowed me to apply the knowledge of theoretical concepts to understand a practical and real situation that I experienced in the past. Moreover, it is my desire that the understanding gained from the analysis will help the academic community in the language department of the university to generate change.

## 2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

One of the requirements to graduate from the program of Licenciatura en Lenguas Modernas at Universidad del Cauca is to develop a research problem and write a final paper in academic English, French or Spanish. The students write the paper in the eighth, ninth and tenth semesters of the program. From my own experience as a former student of this program, I experienced several difficulties when writing this paper in English. These difficulties were related to different factors such as lack of awareness about formal writing, interference from the first language (Spanish) in writing style and technical lexicon among others. Through interaction with current students enrolled in the program, I have found that, after four years, students still feel they are experiencing some serious difficulties in writing the final paper in English. In what follows we can perceive some of these difficulties through their comments.

“I have had some difficulties writing this paper mostly at the time of creating the text and the connections, but this happen mostly because the lack of vocabulary and of course there are some grammatical problems”

“Well yes, I have some difficulties I mean my group and me, we have some failures to write in English the main one is that it is difficult for us to write our ideas in English I sometimes we fail to write some paragraphs and give them”

Moreover, they were asked if they consider their co-workers have expressed similar or other difficulties.

“I think my partners, well most of them, have assimilated language in a different way like studying in books, when these people try to let`s say express themselves writing they say something like I have no fluency”

“My friends, my partners in the work say that they have some problems to write in English, by writing the paper, we have realized we have some important problems of redaction and to express ideas like authors do in researches”

Finally, they were asked about their opinion about the program of Licenciatura en Lenguas Modernas.:

“There are some lacks at the time of specific training let’s say about academic writing”

“Well it, the program gives us many aspects I mean, things we have to deal with what we have to do now but not all”

Based on their comments, it is possible to establish that students in eighth and ninth semester in the program feel they are experiencing difficulties when writing their final paper in English. Hence, I find it is necessary to first identify the exact nature of the difficulties and then to analyze their possible causes with the help of a theoretical framework.

## **2.1 RESEARCH QUESTION**

What are the difficulties in the writing process of the final research paper in English faced by eighth and ninth semester students in the program of Licenciatura en Lenguas Modernas in Universidad del Cauca?

### **3. OBJECTIVES**

#### **3.1 GENERAL OBJECTIVE**

Explore the difficulties faced by eighth and ninth semester students in the writing process of the final research paper.

#### **3.2 SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES**

- 1.** Identify the difficulties in the writing process of the final research paper.
- 2.** Categorize the difficulties found in the process.
- 3.** Analyze these difficulties in relation with the theoretical framework.

#### **4. RATIONALE**

In academic circles, writing is the productive skill which allows researchers all around the world to share their intellectual production with people interested in similar fields. Currently, English has become the academic language by excellence for this purpose and appropriate writing permits the comprehension and discussion of new ideas and findings.

The current work is based on my own experience as a former student and the experience of some current students of the program of Licenciatura en Lenguas Modernas in Universidad del Cauca. It is evident that the difficulties faced by me continue to pose a problem for existing students. This highlights the existence of a fundamental problem which needs to be studied and transformed. However, the first step towards transformation is a profound understanding of the problem, which is the aim of this study. To the best of my knowledge, this problem has not been studied to date within the university and the continued absence of research in this area will affect future generations of students as well.

The results of this study could contribute to possible future work aimed at proposing, designing and adapting mechanisms in order to prevent and correct the difficulties, and it can act as a springboard to implement changes in the learning process so that future students will face fewer difficulties.

## **5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

### **5.1 WRITING**

Through writing, human beings can record thoughts and reflections passing through time and space. In addition, it is possible to see an author's perceptions and intentions since it reflects a direct relationship between thought, language and communication.

Smith (2013, p. 8) stated three main reasons to consider the importance of writing. The first deals with the function of writing as a tool for communication which doesn't generate an immediate oral response. The second states that writing provides a more or less permanent record and the third is the cultural value of writing as art.

Additionally, it is important to consider written language as a learning and teaching object, which, according to Matta (2000) can be approached from three different perspectives. The first one considers writing as a product where the focus is on the final product and surface structure features. The second one refers to writing as a cognitive process which offers a paradigm to research the mental steps or phases in the composition or production of a text. And finally, the last one considers writing conditioned by the context, which involves an ethnographic perspective to analyze the composition of the text.

## 5.2 WRITING AS A COMPLEX PROCESS

In the last five decades many authors have developed studies which have led them to formulate and state theories and explain models leading us to understand the process involved in written composition; albeit, because the objective of this study is to inquire about the writing process in a foreign language in college students, it is necessary to bear in mind this theoretical background about written composition.

Flower and Hayes (1981) proposed a model in which writing is conceived as the union of interweaved processes within a system of goals and sub-goals defined by the writer. In addition, they focused on the mental processes of the writer. This model was called the Cognitive Process Theory of Writing:

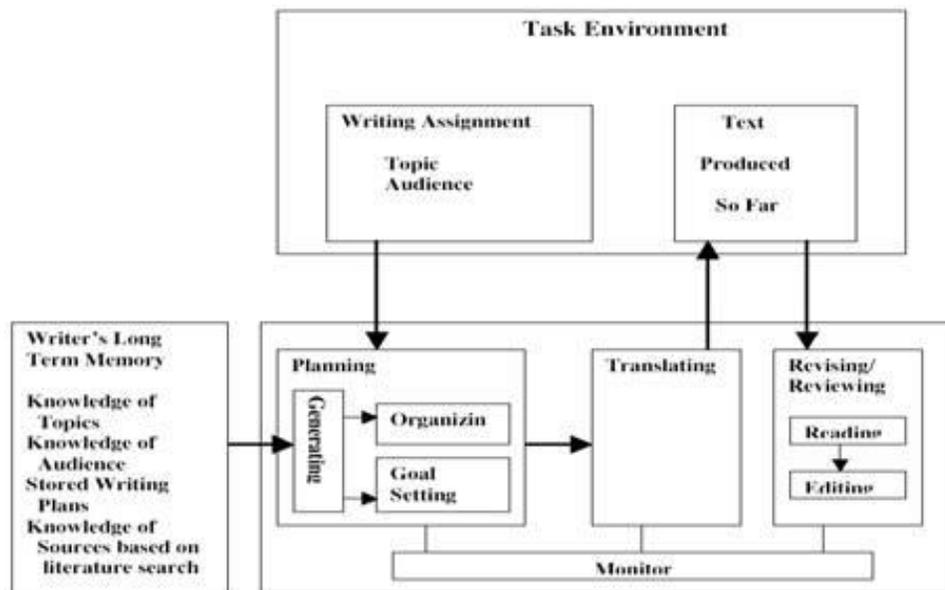
A cognitive process theory of writing (...) represents a major departure from the traditional paradigm of stages in this way: in a stage model the major units of analysis are stages of completion which reflect the growth of a written product, and these stages are organized in a linear sequence or structure. In a process model, the major units of analysis are elementary mental processes, such as the process of generating ideas. And these processes have a hierarchical structure (...) such that idea generation, for example, is a sub-process of Planning. Furthermore, each of these mental acts may occur at any time in the composing process. One major advantage of identifying these basic cognitive processes or thinking skills writers use is that we can then compare the composing strategies of good and poor writers. And we can look at writing in a much more detailed way. (Flower & Hayes, 1981, p. 367-368)

Influenced by the contributions of cognitive psychology, their model is composed of three main moments. The first is the situation of communication (task environment) which

makes reference to the external aspects such as composition topic, receiver, channel, and time, among others. The second element is the writer's long-term memory. It gives all the information stored in the brain related to the topic and context. Finally, Flower and Hayes name the writing processes as those related to translation of thoughts into written language.

For Flower and Hayes, writing is considered as a task of resolving problems and they consider that the key in the process of composition is the definition of the rhetorical problem which the writer proposes and then tries to solve through production of text. The three main elements which play a significant role during this task of solving problems are strategies, previous knowledge and memory.

**Figure1:** Cognitive Process Model.



**Source:** Flower and Hayes, 1981, page 370.

Figure 1 shows the possible relation among all the elements, which reflects the idea that the act of composing is characterized by a series of recursive operations which can move forward or backward at any time.

The teaching of composition strategies chosen by Flower and Hayes (1981, pp. 386-387) consists of the stimulation of the cognitive abilities of the subjects. They propose three main types of strategies:

1. The strategies of the writer to comprehend the rhetorical situation: these strategies imply that the writer must be conscious about the receivers and the expectations generated by the act of composing.

2. The strategies of the writer to adapt his or herself to the needs of a reader: these strategies are related to the way organization and planning of the text happens, so that the reader comprehends the objective of the text and remembers it throughout the reading while also comprehending the arguments and finding the discussion point.

3. The strategies of the writer for the composing act: these strategies are related to the generation of ideas, monitoring and thought organization and writing.

In 1996, John Hayes updated the model developed with Linda Flower during the 80s, by enriching it with sociocultural and affective aspects. In this updated model, two big areas are identified: the task context and the individual.

The task environment purports some social and environmental conditions such as the audience for the written production, the collaborators who co-write the text and can affect the final product, the stages in the composition of the text and the medium in which the text is composed.

The individual aspects are memory, cognition, and the affective filter (see fig. 2). In terms of memory, Hayes (1996) does not simply consider long-term memory but also gives a central role to working memory. Hayes conceived memory as a resource for storing

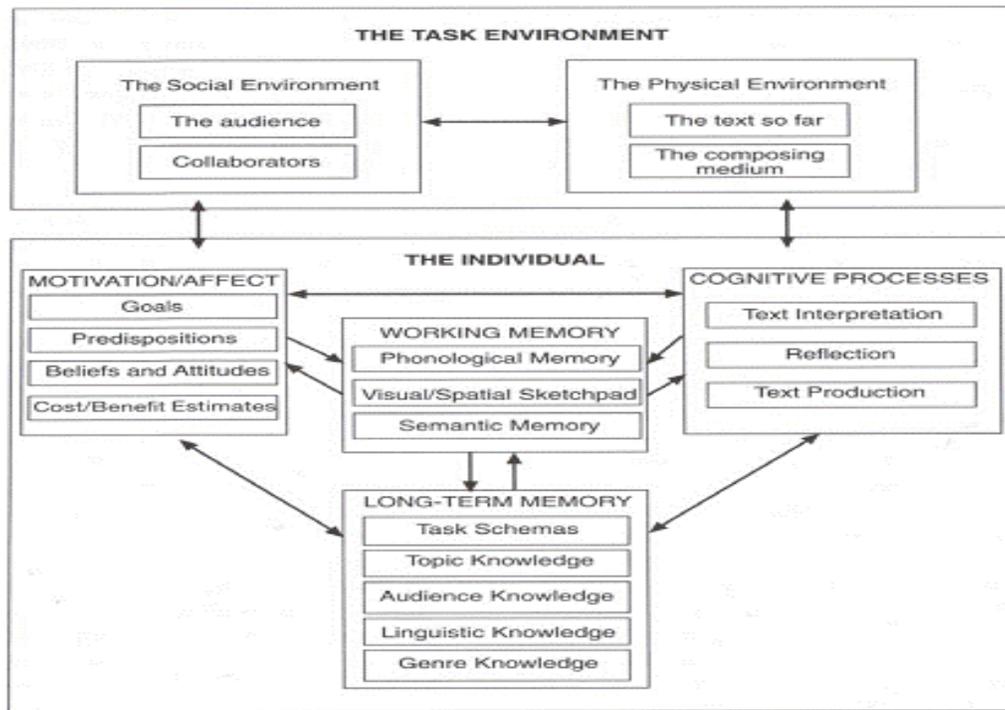
information (long-term memory), for developing cognitive processes during composition (working memory), which in turn, encircles phonologic, semantic and visual memories which obey specific aspects during the redaction process.

In terms of the cognitive process, the model leaves out the sub-processes of composition (planning, formulation and edition) presented in the previous model (Flower and Hayes, 1981), and focuses on more transverse aspects such as inner interpretation, reflection, problem solving and inferences among other aspects. Inner representation of the ideas, according to this model, is created from input. Then through analysis, decoding and reflection, this representation transforms into output. Motivation and emotional aspects are essential in Hayes' updated model. He based his work on a series of empirical data which revealed that the beliefs a person has about a task, influence the result and the process of composition. In a nutshell, the self-perception of a person about his or her skills as a writer impacts the production process both negatively and/or positively. .

Additionally, Hayes includes visual and spatial aspects by considering the multi-facet nature of many texts (language-image). The cognitive processes are defined in a broader way and give relevance to motivation/affectivity due to their impact in the process of composing “writing is a communicative act which requires a social context and an environment. It is a generative activity which requires motivation, cognitive processes and memory.” (Hayes, 1996, p.2).

The social context refers to the audience and the co-workers who may participate in the composition, hence, this model includes different writing types such as collaborative writing (see fig. 2), “What we write, how we write, and who we write to is shaped by social convention and by our history of social interaction” (Hayes, 1996, p. 5).

**Figure 2:** Cognitive-Affective Model.



**Source:** Hayes, 1996, page 20

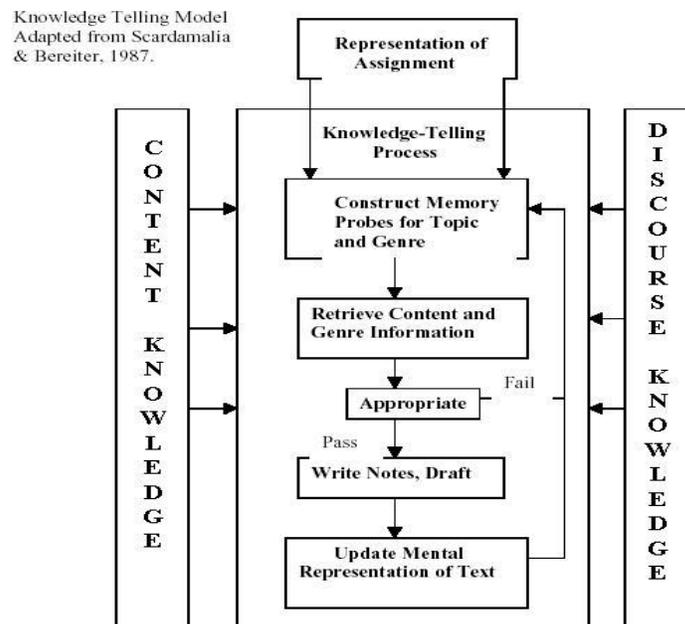
Additionally, Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) made a distinction between mature and immature writers through a double model of writing: a knowledge-telling model of writing and a knowledge-transforming model of writing. According to this model, the development of ideas when writing depends on the extent to which the acquisition of content is strategically controlled in order to satisfy the rhetorical goals.

For Bereiter and Scardamalia, immature writers employ a knowledge-telling strategy in which written production is guided by the direct retrieval of content from long-term memory and is organized only by the associative relationships between content as it is stored in long-term memory.

Knowledge telling provides a natural and efficient solution to the problems immature writers face in generating text content without external support. [...] The solution is natural because it makes use of readily available knowledge -thus favorable to report of personal experience- and it relies on already existing discourse-production skills in making use of external cues and cues generated from language production itself. It preserves the straight-ahead form of oral language production and requires no significantly greater amount of planning or goal-setting than does ordinary conversation. (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987, p. 9)

Figure 3 represents the telling knowledge model in which immature writers only construct a superficial representation of a given writing task and locate identifiers of topic and genre.

**Figure 3:** Knowledge Telling Model of Writing



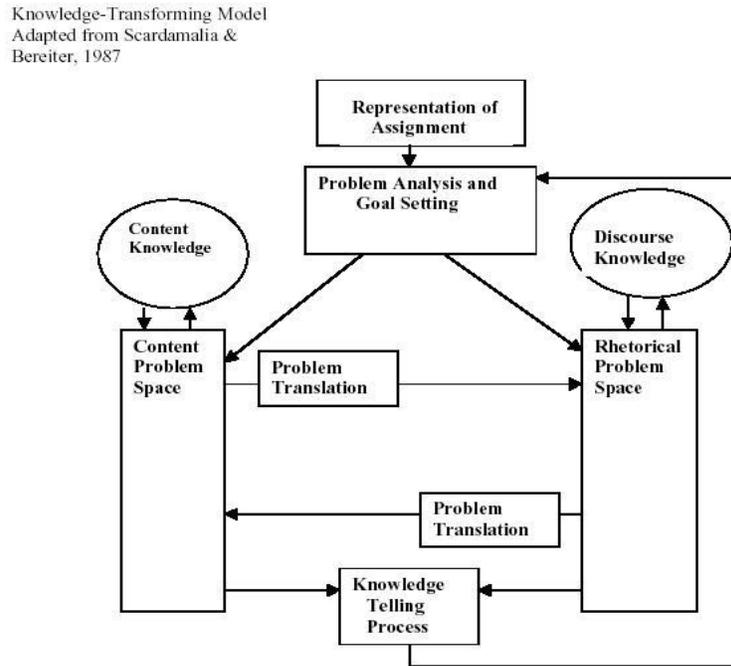
**Source:** Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987, page 8.

In contrast, mature writers employ a knowledge-transforming strategy, which involves constructing a representation of the rhetorical or communicative problem to be solved and using the goals derived from this representation to lead the generation and evaluation of content during written composition.

Therefore, mature writers show more evidence of reflective thought during writing, since they develop more elaborate plans before writing. In addition, they modify and elaborate these plans more radically during writing, and revise their initial drafts of texts more extensively. Hence, mature writers' texts are shaped to the needs of the reader, while adapting their thought to their communicative goals. These writers also develop their understanding of what they are writing about. "In the process of achieving their set goals, their knowledge is improved, reflected upon, revised, organized, and more richly interconnected. Thus, they not only produce better writing, but they personally gain more from the process." (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1985, p.16)

Bereiter & Scardamalia (1987) show this contrast in their knowledge transforming model of writing (see figure 4). They emphasized that this model was not a simple evolution of the knowledge telling model but that it involved fundamental changes in the way that the writing task is defined by the writer and in the way that it is carried out. Thus, although it holds the knowledge telling model as a characterization of the process through which, content is retrieved from memory, this is settled within an argumentation between content and rhetorical problem spaces.

**Figure 4:** Bereiter & Scardamalia's (1987) Knowledge Transforming Model of Writing.



**Source:** Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1987, page 12.

Additionally, the model shows two characteristics of the writing process. First, it reflects the fact that ideas are represented, not only as a reflection of the writer's knowledge i.e. the content space, but also in terms of their rhetorical function within the text i.e. the rhetorical space. Second, the model shows that writing is not only an exercise of adapting content to the rhetorical context, but it is also an emergent process in which content is formulated as the text progresses.

Moreover, according to Galbraith (2009), the knowledge transforming model shares the general perspective of classical cognitive models about the higher-level reflective thinking involved in writing. At first sight, the clear separation between thinking processes and text production processes made by these models might be taken to imply that the main focus of research on L2 writing should be on text production processes. One might assume

that the goal-directed thought involved in effective writing is common to both L1 and L2 contexts, and that the essential difference between the two is in how the output of these central processes is formulated in language. However, a key feature of the knowledge-transforming model in particular is that it emphasizes the origin of the writer's goals in their discourse knowledge. To the extent that L2 involves not just using a different language but also adopting different discourse conventions, it may also involve learning different ways of thinking. A skilled L2 writer may find it difficult to adapt their writing process to an unfamiliar genre even when, and perhaps because, they are skilled and fluent writers in an L1 genre. (Galbraith, 2009, p. 11).

It is important to highlight that these two models are closely related with the subjects observed in this study. On one hand, it is possible to consider students of eighth semester as immature writers who are beginning to develop their ideas and who expressed that they have difficulties writing their first drafts. In their first drafts, eighth semester students for example, who are writing about what learning strategies are the most suitable for English class with kids, can locate identifiers such as strategies according to age, context, materials etc. When identifiers have been established, they will help as clues for searching in the memory. This will release more and more associated concepts about the topic. For this, writers can use memory or any information they have at hand. Once some text has been produced, this will help as an additional source of identifiers of topic and genre.

Additionally, for the purpose of this study, it is possible to consider ninth semester students to be mature writers only in relation to eighth semester students i.e. these students do not have all the characteristics for being mature writers as established by Bereiter and Scardamalia, however, they have overcome some difficulties of the first stages of the writing

process and have developed some strategies such as editing and have developed as well reflective thought and elaborate plans. Nevertheless, they also confessed having some difficulties.

Considering another theoretical approach, Didactext group's<sup>1</sup> model approaches the process of composition from a global perspective bearing in mind the interaction of many dimensions, "We conceive the creation of a text as a complex process in which many factors e.g. cultural, social, affective, cognitive, physical (visual-motor), discursive, semantic, pragmatic and verbal participate in a interrelated way." (Didactext Group, 2003, p. 78).

The Didactext group's proposal is located within the socio-cognitive paradigm, since it considers culture, the specific context in which a text is developed and mental processes which are part of the process of composition. The model has three main components: the cultural sphere, the contextual sphere and the individual sphere. Referring to the first sphere, the model is based on the proposals of cultural psychology (Wertsch, 1991; Cole, 1999; Municio & Pozo, 2001).

Cultural psychology considers necessary to incorporate in the human mind, external memory systems given by culture, which not only enlarge our knowledge of the world and ourselves but also change it irreversibly and radically, when generating new epistemic functions, new ways of knowing the world and changing it. (Municio & Pozo 2001, cited in Didactext Group, 2003, p. 79).

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<sup>1</sup>The Didactext group is a research group which arose from the Doctorate program in Didactics of Languages and Literature in Universidad Complutense de Madrid. This group was originally composed of eleven college professors from Spain, Colombia and Chile.

In other words, the first component reflects the beliefs, textual and linguistic norms, historical and ideological experiences adapted by a group or collective shared elements, which a writer can make use of during the creative process of composition.

The second component, the contextual sphere, is focused on the external factor described by Hayes (1996), in terms of social context (audience and coworkers) and the context of the composition. The Didactext Group's proposal conceives this sphere in a more general way, relating aspects in the social context (educational, family and economic environment), the situational context (geographical and demographical space) and the physical context (materials and media used for writing).

The individual sphere makes reference to the individual factors such as motivation, emotions, cognitive and metacognitive strategies and memory.

Writing a complex text as the one required by the program in Licenciatura en Lenguas Modernas Inglés y Francés, could involve many complex components as considered by the three models presented above. However, the students of eighth and ninth semester selected for this study not only face the complex process of writing, but of writing in a foreign language, in their case, English.

### **5.3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN L1 AND L2**

Some research associated with foreign language teaching and learning was influenced until the late 60s by paradigms proposed by behaviorism and it was limited to contrastive analysis of the languages involved in the learning process (Gass & Selinker, 2001). At that time, teachers believed that students' background of the mother tongue, influenced negatively in foreign language learning (especially in oral performance). In addition, some of the authors at this time (under the influence of behaviorist views) explained second language learning as the development of a new set of habits that could be learned through the stimulus-response method (Lado, 1957). It was predicted that virtually all errors could be explained as interference (or negative transfer) from L1.

Hence, teaching materials and strategies were aimed at preventing and avoiding lack of precision and mistake making in order to allow successful foreign language development (Gass & Selinker, 2001).

In contrast, Murphy (2003, p.17-18) points out that there isn't an important difference between the acquisition process of L1 and L2. In this suggestion, a learner who doesn't have sufficient exposure to the new language will find it difficult to acquire it. The hypothesis is that acquisition of L1 is based on sufficient exposure and that L2 should be acquired in the same fashion.

Moreover, Krashen (cited in Murphy, 2003), stated that it is enough to have an adequate exposure to the linguistic input and to have appropriate levels of motivation in order to learn a new language. For Schachter (cited in Murphy, 2003), the mother tongue exerts a

restrictive function of transference which may affect the learning process of a foreign or second language.

Afterwards, research carried out by some authors such as Cummins (1979; 1981), Delmastro & Salazar (2004) and Salazar (2006), was focused on the positive influence of the mother tongue in the foreign or second language learning process. Hence, and based on the supposition that a learner does not start foreign or second language learning from a linguistic void, on the contrary, the learners bring with them a baggage of previous knowledge and experiences from their mother tongue, which, gives them formal language elements e.g. phonological, morphological, syntactic and semantic; becoming cognitive facilitators to develop foreign or second language competences.

Since the objective of this report is aimed at exploring difficulties in writing in a foreign language, some research will be presented showing an analysis of the writing processes during the learning of English as a foreign or second language, bearing in mind the main processes of composition i.e. planning, formulation and edition.

Jones and Tetroe (1987) analyzed the process of planning. In their study, they observed 6 Hispanic learners of English as a second language. The comparison between planning strategies in L1 and L2 revealed many similarities. They observed that the learners establishing abstract goals in their L1 did so in L2 as well. The study concluded that the planning strategies were transferred.

Hall (1990) carried out a study in which he observed the editing process in 4 learners of English at advanced levels and with a different mother tongue. After analyzing the editing

process of two written compositions in both L1 and L2, it was observed that with some exceptions, writers at advanced levels used the same strategies of editing in both languages.

Roca de Larios, Manchón & Murphy (2007) studied the process of restructuring. According to these authors, restructuring includes previous experiences of learning, which can influence in the planning of the written text in L2, because, restructuring processes are transferable among languages. This can explain that more competent writers are concerned with the general organization of the text while planning and writing in contrast to less-experienced writers.

The data analysis allowed them to conclude that the use of restructuring is independent from the mastering of L2 i.e. the lack of linguistic resources is not a limiting factor to use it. In addition, the study suggests that writers appeal to the strategy of restructuring in L2 not only when they feel incapable of expressing an idea because of a lack of linguistic resources, but also to handle the complex and cyclic nature of L2 composition.

Bearing in mind the conclusions of these research studies, the transference of linguistic abilities from the mother tongue when learning a second or foreign language is very evident.

Another area of interest in this field is that of linguistic interdependence. Cummins (1981) proposed the hypothesis of linguistic interdependence as:

For as long as the instruction in L1 is effective to promote competence in L1, the transference in this competence to the L2 will be possible if there exists an adequate exposition to the L2 (at school or in the setting) and an adequate motivation to learn the L2.(Cummins,1981, p.29).

The proposal by Cummins focused on the use of language as a common instrument of human beings by considering the formal and common characteristics of the different linguistic systems. The first version of the theory sketched by Cummins suggested that if the setting of the learner gave him or her enough stimuli to maintain the mother tongue, the intensive exposure to the second language in academic contexts would produce a fast development of L2, without harmful side effects to the L1. On the contrary, in the case that the mother tongue was not developed enough outside the context of formal instruction, the prolonged exposure to the L2 would obstruct the development of the L1, and this in turn, will represent a difficulty in the development of bilingualism.

Moreover, the concept of transference of abilities from mother tongue to the L2 has been defined as: “The process through which the learner is capable of using previous acquired knowledge (concepts, operations, strategies, attitudes, skills and abilities) to face both new academic and daily life situations and challenges.” (Bolivar, 2002, p. 62)

Santrock (2002) points out that the transference occurs when a person applies previous experiences and knowledge to learn or to solve problems in new situations by incorporating problem solving to this conceptual outlook. The transference occurs independently whether the previous learning helps or makes the new learning difficult. In the cases in which a previous learning benefits or facilitates some subsequent execution, the transference is positive. In contrast, if previous knowledge obstructs or interferes somehow with new learning, the transference is negative

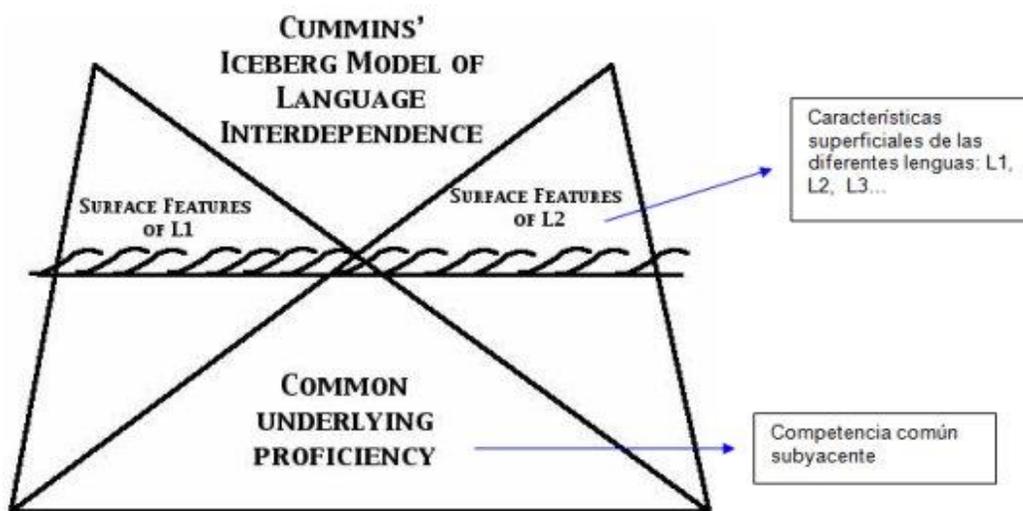
Cummins (1981) later reformulated the hypothesis explained earlier. If the instruction in a certain language is effective in promoting competence in that language, then, the transference of that competence to another language will be possible if there exists an

adequate exposure to the other language; besides, there needs to be an appropriate motivation towards the learning of the second or foreign language.

The reformulation of the hypothesis of the linguistic interdependence predicts both transference of competence from mother tongue to second or foreign language and viceversa, having as special condition an adequate motivation to learn another language.

According to Cummins' iceberg model, which supports the hypothesis of linguistic interdependence, there are underlying mental processes common to both languages.

**Figure 5:** Cummins' Iceberg Model of Language Interdependence.



**Source:** Cummins, 1981, page16.

Netten, Germain & Séguin (2002), in relation to the Iceberg Model, explain that the analogy that Cummins establishes with an iceberg is due to the belief that at the surface structure level, the mother tongue and the new language appear to be working in an isolated way and independently of each other. Nevertheless, underneath this structure, there occur academic and intellectual processes which are shared by both languages in contact. Based on Cummins' theory, a portion of the competence in mother tongue can be transferred to the learning contexts of another language. Netten, Germain & Séguin (2002) affirmed that the postulates by Cummins work also the other way around i.e. while the subjects are learning a foreign or second language, they can be developing certain competence which can be transferred to the mother tongue subsequently.

The results from the research carried out over the last 30 years have been substantial to comprehend the way language learning processes occur. One of the most significant contributions consists of the identification of multiple variables which affect the process and the quality of a written text. It is possible to highlight two of them. On one hand, the strategic competence i.e. the use of procedures and strategies of writing; on the other hand, the writer's mastering of L2 (Cabaleiro Gonzales, 2003). Albeit, the influence of these two factors on L2 composition is undeniable, there is not yet a precise agreement about the relation among them, and chiefly to what extent, the transference of abilities depends on the mastering of L2. It is evident that the new learning is affected somehow by the previous learning. This relation between one learning and the other can be explained through the transference process.

## **5.4. GROUP WRITING**

Group writing adds more complexity to an already complex process. Given that the students who are the focus of this study choose to write their final paper in groups, it is necessary to explore theories involving positive and negative aspects of group writing.

Authors such as Moore (2003), suggest that group writing helps the individuals of the group to learn about writing conventions. Additionally, Morss and Murray (2001) and Pololi et al. (2004) state that group writing encourages individuals to make time to write and write more regularly. Moreover, Ferguson (2009) agrees that students writing in groups are glad to practice and develop their writing skills by using the group as motivator to compose and /or revise their drafts.

In contrast, Ewald and MacCallum (1990) mention some tension found in groups in collaborative writing exercises. However, this tension can be both positive and negative because individual issues can influence group dynamics. If the members of a group feel comfortable with their roles the tension is positive, but if on the contrary, the group members are not satisfied and perceive that other members are not contributing at the same level, the tension is negative.

In a study carried out by Duin (1990), he concluded that some of the most common difficulties in group writing were related to conflicts occurring not about the content of the written task but, about compatibility issues in in the group. In his study, Duin included some of the perceptions of individuals writing in groups which are evident in comments such as: “none of the other members do her or his share”, “Other members do not meet the deadlines” and “I end up doing most of the work” (Duin, 1990, p.45).

However, one of the most complete descriptions about problems generated when writing in groups was made by Forman and Katsky (1986). They described that there are difficulties at socio/affective level. According to them, the socio-affective difficulties include poor conflict management, personality differences and unresolved emotional issues which are related to personal needs, styles and schedules. Another socio-affective factor is the motivation for conducting a writing project. While some of the members regard the writing project as another requirement in their academic process, and want to finish it as soon as possible, other members regard the writing project as an important personal goal and want to spend the necessary time to achieve a satisfactory piece of work (Forman and Katsky, 1986, pp. 25-26).

Additionally, Forman and Katsky mention that the members of writing groups have different work styles and some members prefer to operate autonomously and conduct their part of the project on their own. In that regard, Sormunen, Lehtiö and Heinström (2011) also mention in their study of writing groups that many students split group work assignments into individually conducted projects. According to their results, it is possible that when these students meet to join the parts of a written task, some members feel they are doing most of the work and that others are not participating enough.

## **6. METHODOLOGICAL PROPOSAL**

This part is aimed at explaining the empirical context and the subjects involved in the research as well as the methodological approach of the study.

### **6.1. THE EMPIRICAL CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

The Universidad del Cauca was founded by order of General Francisco de Paula Santander in 1827 with the support of President Simon Bolivar. It was established from the roots of thinking of the Seminario Mayor del Cauca founded in 1609, and supported by the ideas of philosophical, political and scientific movements of the Illustration period. During the XX century, the Universidad del Cauca became the attraction spot for many students from different regions of the country, chiefly the southwest.

The Universidad del Cauca is still loyal to its motto "Posteris Lymen Moritvrvs Edat" which means *he who is going to die, leave his light for posterity*, and has a historic and permanent commitment with the construction of an equitable and fair society and the education of an integral human being with ethical and cooperative values. Additionally, it is an institution which promotes knowledge, progress, freedom of expression and civic participation. During the last decade, it has been distinguished because of its research initiatives reflected in more than 101 research groups recognized by Colciencias.

The Universidad del Cauca's main campus is located in Popayán. It is divided in nine main faculties or campus: Educación, Ciencias Agropecuarias, Ciencias Contables, Ciencias Sociales y Derecho, Medicina, Electronica, Ingenieria Civil y Ciencias Humanas.

The department of modern languages is located within the school of Education. Currently, the only program offered by this department is the Program in Licenciatura en Lenguas Modernas Inglés-Francés. It was founded in 1985 and was certified by the Ministerio de Educación Nacional (MEN) in 1998.

Currently, the program has a staff of 14 full-time teachers, 4 temporary teachers and 2 administrative staff. The activities of the program are developed within the facilities of the school of Education which include 2 language laboratories, 1 video room, and a library aimed at the development of the educational practice of language teachers called UNIDPEL.

By the final semester, all the students of the program are asked to propose and develop a final language-related research problem and hand in a final paper which can be written in Spanish, English or French.

This final paper must contain an introduction, problem statement, justification, objectives, methodology, and theoretical framework, analysis of information, results and conclusions. The final paper is expected to be well structured and written in appropriate language for an academic research document.

The program of Licenciatura en Lenguas Modernas offers a series of courses aimed at improving the students' English language skills both written and oral e.g. Inglés I, II, III, IV and V during the first five semesters, Taller de Inglés in seventh semester, Literatura en Inglés I and II in eighth and ninth semesters and Comunicación intercultural en Inglés in ninth semester ([www.unicauca.edu.co](http://www.unicauca.edu.co)). Nevertheless, as seen in the section of the problem statement and based on my own experience, students believe that it is necessary to establish a specific course aimed at scholarly writing, which is not present in the current curriculum.

## 6.2 DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH SUBJECTS

For the purpose of this research, the total population selected was 31 students, 16 students in eighth semester and 15 students in ninth semester from the program of Licenciatura en Lenguas Modernas Inglés-Francés at Universidad del Cauca at second academic term in 2014 (see table 1). The sample consists of all the students who have chosen to write their final paper in English. The remainder of 36 students chose to write their paper in either French or Spanish and therefore, are not within the scope of this study.

**Table 1:**  
Distribution of the students in semesters and research groups.

<b>Total number of students in eighth and ninth semester*</b>	<b>Study sample</b>	<b>Eighth semester sample</b>	<b>Ninth semester sample</b>	<b>Research groups in eighth semester</b>	<b>Research groups in ninth semester</b>
<b>67</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>

**\* This number of students from eighth and ninth semester corresponds to the second academic term in 2014.**

The 31 students selected worked in different research projects which were focused on different linguistic phenomena concerning English learning or teaching such as bilingualism, metacognition, translation, teaching methodology implementation and ICTs. They were both male and female from different socio-economic contexts and with different academic backgrounds (some of them graduated from public high schools, some others from private and bilingual institutions).

The selection of these subjects was based on the fact that they are in two different stages of the process of writing the final paper and can offer a clearer viewpoint for the identification of the difficulties presented in this process. The process of writing the final research paper begins at the very end of the seventh semester (first proposal of the research idea and initial outline of the paper). By the eighth semester, students have to start developing their ideas about the research and must present the introduction, objectives, rationale, and the outline (review of literature) for the theoretical framework. During the ninth semester, students have to develop depth, start writing the theoretical framework, the method and materials and start to develop the field work and data collection.

The participant groups of this study worked with different tutors who are full-time teachers in the language department. These tutors use different strategies and methodologies to work with each group depending on the needs and objectives of the work. Some of them, for example, ask their students for weekly advances and provide immediate feedback; some others prefer periodical evidence and assess the work in specific deadlines.

## **6.3 METHODOLOGY**

### **6.3.1 DATA COLLECTION**

In order to collect information related to the difficulties of the students described above, it was necessary to organize a series of focal groups as well as some interviews with the tutors of these students.

The focal groups were organized within the facilities of the University of Cauca during four different sessions and were carried out in English. They included open questions about the writing process during their progress in the program and mainly about the process of writing their final paper and derived difficulties (see appendix 1). To facilitate the analysis of information the discussion from the focal groups was audio-recorded.

The interviews with the tutors were carried out as well within the facilities of Universidad del Cauca. For this work, four tutors were interviewed; one tutor is the adviser of students from eighth semester only, another of students from ninth semester only and the other two are advisers for students from both semesters. These interviews included open questions about their considerations about the main difficulties their students are facing at the time of writing their final report in English. These interviews were audio-recorded (see appendix 2).

### **6.3.2 ANALYSIS OF THE DATA**

After collecting the required data for this study, it was necessary to transcribe the discussions from both focal groups and the interviews with the tutors. The transcription of the audio records was carried out through Express Scribe Transcription Software by NCH software. The resulting transcriptions were saved as Microsoft Word documents in order to provide appropriate excerpts and evidence from both focal groups and interviews at the time of showing the results in section 7.

## 7. RESULTS

After transcribing and observing the focal group answers as well as the four interviews with the tutors in charge of some research groups, it was possible to identify some of the writing problems presented in the final research paper of both eighth and ninth semester students. The answers of students and tutors confirmed the existence of difficulties in this writing process as suggested in the problem statement.

The discussions with the students and tutors revealed information about the difficulties which was placed into categories for easier comprehension and analysis (see table 2).

**Table 2:**  
Distribution of the difficulties in both eighth and ninth semester students

Number of Students per each Difficulty										
Semester	Total students	Punctuation	Structure of the paragraph	Cohesion /Grammar	Coherence	Rhetoric	Translation	Vocabulary	Informal writing vs Formal writing	Supporting ideas and quotation
8th	16	4	5	4	2	3	6	4	5	2
9th	15	1	0	2	6	6	3	0	0	0

Table 2 shows the difficulties faced by students from both eighth and ninth semester. The difficulties were not pre-established, but they came up from the comments of the students during the focal groups. The numbers correspond to the number of students who mentioned having one or another difficulty.

Moreover, some comments by students have been included to provide additional evidence of the study. The comments presented below show underlying words which refer to specific problems students faced in both eighth and ninth semesters.

## 7.1 EIGHTH SEMESTER STUDENTS' COMMENTS

Student A: "I think that some of the problems are in grammar, we have problems for example punctuation. We have problems in Spanish and we are going to have the same problems in English".

Student B: "In the case of our group, for example, in some paragraphs we are not hundred percent sure about the structure for the paragraphs, for example the topic sentences and the conclusion we have in the paragraphs of our draft".

Student C: "When in groups, my classmates and I have difficulties in cohesion. Our tutor has told us that there are many errors in terms of syntax, writing a lot of complex sentences because we need to translate that into English so that, is difficult".

Student D: "The paper we have in this moment is the draft of our final project. We have some problems of coherence. I think, in this moment it's a little bit, well the paragraphs are about different things and our advisor said us that we have to write about the same topic but in this moment, some of my friends in the group they are writing individually and then we try to put just one paper but it is very hard, we have to do it in group".

Student E: "One of my problems that I have, we our group has, is grammar in some paragraphs, in some sentences. Sometimes the beginning of the sentence is not good and the idea is, the idea loses order and sense"

Student F: "Sometimes, when the tutor gives us feedback, one of the main things, the most important things is that we write in English like in Spanish, I mean, the tutor says to us, you are repeating or going around the bushes with the idea, be shorter and precise with the development of the idea, but it's hard you know, to write an idea in few words, I have, we have to develop it".

Student G: “There’s some structural things, things like putting verbs before the subject, and you said, yes it is how you translate this sentence word by word from Spanish to English, so there are some mistakes like that. But not many as you could think. It’s not like something of translating. That’s not it's a problem but not a big thing. It’s not the biggest problem”.

Student H: “Well, our tutor tells us that we need to use different vocabulary, I mean, there are some words that, these words are not the correct in a sentence or an idea”.

Student I: “It’s more complicated because we have to make a good writing way or in a formal way, we have to follow rules, is more complicated because in other semesters we have to write but a simple paper or any topic. But in this case we have to focus in a topic that we have to make many research, we have to make citations, references, quotations, and so is so difficult we have to do it in a formal way”

Student J: “Our tutors, said to me, when I am writing something, I need to support some ideas, it is just not to write my ideas, and say I am going to do this or to share this, no, because why is the reason to say this, and who's the author am following or need to quote, so the most important is to be clear and supporting with something”.

As can be seen from eighth semester students’ comments, they mention a variety of difficulties. Most of these difficulties are related to translation and paragraph structure.

## 7.2 NINTH SEMESTER STUDENTS' COMMENTS

Student A: "For me, my biggest weakness is punctuation, because I have many failures punctuating in Spanish so, because I have a lot of problems in this sense. One of my strengths my text despite they are no correct in punctuation, they feel like natural. Something like that".

Student B: "I think that sometimes we have grammar mistakes and some sentences look like different from the others when I write"

Student C: "For me is probably rhetorical awareness, because the text changes when we write it in English, sometimes I am not too worried about that, and we continue writing as do in Spanish".

Student D: "One of the corrections is translation and we have been told that we mix both languages and write things in English but like if we do in Spanish".

Student E: "I consider, to organize ideas, the structure, the connection of the text in general. The coherence of the elements or chapter of the work, we have many problems in this".

Student F: "The main problem is cohesion and coherence, the relation among the ideas and that is being some problem our advisor has pointed out".

Student G: "Sometime we repeat a lot the same ideas, so repetition. Writing in circles, rhetoric awareness I think".

We can see from the comments above that ninth students also mention having a number of difficulties. It is possible to observe more comments related to rhetoric and coherence in ninth semester students than in eighth semester. This will be discussed later in the analysis chapter.

### 7.3 TUTORS' COMMENTS

Tutor 1: "In the case of the students from eighth semester, the connection of the ideas is neglected, when you talk to them, they have some good ideas but when checking the paragraphs, they are not connected, they are not checking the order and hierarchy of ideas. There is too much information in one single paragraph without controlling idea. They write in one paragraph too much information and they just don't write introduction and conclusion".

Tutor 2: "Yes, well, cohesion is a complicated issue to teach and to learn. You can show them how to structure a sentence or group of sentences and built a text grammatically correct. But what I see in the rough drafts is that they are writing without considering aspects such as noun phrases, verbs' form, and the passive and active voice. These are the biggest cohesion issues I can see in this, in the eighth semester students' works or drafts".

Tutor 2: "The rough drafts they present to me are text with no coherence, in other words, the text doesn't follow, as I told you a, logical flow. Yes, they write some sentence but they are not connected each other, they seem isolated and this is a kind of writing where you must connect every part to the objective or objectives of your work"

Tutor 3: "In some cases, the idea is not well developed and they tend to start an idea and write three or four paragraphs about a single idea with no conclusion. In other words, they tend to write pretty huge amounts of lines and the idea is not completely developed, that's pretty close to the way the write in Spanish"

Tutor 4: "When you observe the text at this stage, you find a text composed mainly by short texts with minimal or no relation among them. The whole document, especially the theoretical framework is disconnected and the

analysis or the advances of the analysis they have shown me is divided into little different texts, which are good, sound good, but as reader you have to stop and look for ideas, where did I read this before?, ah yes two paragraphs above. So, you can realize the effort they do when writing but, anyway, there is no relation there is no connection in the paragraphs of the text”.

Tutor 4: “Let's be honest; the students are not going to read by their own. They don't say, you know what, I have this free hour and I am going to read this academic essay, no, something like a newspaper or something fun. I mean the problem is very hard to write if you don't read, so we probably should do more on that, on reading and writing essays. But also read each other's essays and see what they are doing.”

As we can see from the comments by the tutors, there are common elements between the difficulties presented in both eighth and ninth semester when writing in academic English and the perspective of their tutors and readers.

## **8. ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS**

In this section, the possible causes of some difficulties shown in the results will be analyzed by using the different concepts and theories shown in the theoretical framework.

### **8.1 ABOUT THE DIFFICULTIES IN BOTH EIGHTH AND NINTH SEMESTER**

As seen in the results section, it is possible to observe that in ninth semester the number of most difficulties expressed by the students and tutors decreased in relation to eighth semester students, for example in terms of paragraph structure and problems in vocabulary, quotation and formal writing. Nevertheless, in terms of coherence and rhetoric, more problems were observed with ninth semester students.

By following the concepts of mature and immature writers by Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987), it is possible to say that eighth semester students could be considered, to some extent, immature writers because they experience most difficulties in their initial drafts due to the fact that they have not yet established a structured plan and have not set goals for their text. Additionally, it is probable that they use knowledge-telling strategy because they are only conserving the straight-ahead form of oral language production which, as stated by Bereiter and Scardamalia, does not require a significant amount of planning or goal-setting than ordinary conversation.

In contrast, ninth semester students have gone deeper into the structure of their work and have analyzed, to some extent, the problem involved in their work and have clarified their goals related to the research problem. Hence, it is possible to establish that ninth semester students could be considered mature writers according to the principles of Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987, p. 9) because they probably use a knowledge-transforming strategy,

which involves representing a rhetorical or communicative problem and not simply making use of available knowledge and content.

Notwithstanding the stage of writing, as seen in the result section, there are some problems that eighth and ninth semester students have in common. Both groups of students experience difficulties at micro and macro textual level in five common categories: punctuation, cohesion, coherence, rhetoric and translation. Thus, it is necessary to analyze the possible causes of these difficulties.

## **8.2 POSSIBLE CAUSES OF DIFFICULTIES**

Albeit, punctuation difficulties can be described at micro-textual level, it may affect what some tutors called the logical flow of the writing. Hence, it slows down the work of the reader.

Punctuation was mentioned in both focal groups to be a difficulty. In table 2, it is possible to observe the number of students in both semesters showing difficulties related to punctuation. In some comments in sections 7.1 and 7.2 it is possible to observe as well how some of these difficulties are related to competence in the mother tongue, in this case Spanish. They mentioned that they did not master the use of periods, commas, colons, semicolons etc. in the mother tongue; thus, the problem was transferred from Spanish to English as mentioned by Santrock (2002) creating a negative transference from L1 to L2.

Cummins (1981) also mentions this phenomenon of competence transference. In his Iceberg Model, he mentions that there are common underlying aspects in both the mother tongue and the second or foreign language. Thus, if as in this case, the punctuation elements in Spanish are not clear, English writing will be affected as well. However, the problem of

punctuation was less common in ninth semester than eighth. It is possible to observe that the number of punctuation difficulties decreased: 4 students mentioned this in eighth semester and only 1 student in ninth semester. This could be caused by many factors including a positive responding to the tutor's feedback, development of punctuation awareness promoted by tutors etc.

Besides punctuation, cohesion is another difficulty at micro-textual level which can lead to loss of logical flow during reading. In the results section, cohesion centered around grammar issues. Since cohesion deals with the connection of ideas at sentence level, this connection may be affected negatively through the misuse of spelling, syntax and other grammar elements.

In table 2 and sections 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3 it is possible to observe some individuals of different groups having problems with the structure of the sentences or cohesion. From these comments only a few mentioned that they made a translation process from L1 to L2, but most of them mentioned writing directly in English. Hence, it is possible to say that the problem may lie in one of the dimensions proposed by Flowers and Hayes (1981) in their cognitive process model of composition. Even though, eighth semester students have set the rhetorical problem in their initial drafts, they present difficulties when translating thoughts into written language.

As seen in table 2 and in section 7.1, eighth semester students mentioned some difficulties about cohesion, however as occurred with punctuation, this problem decreased significantly in the subsequent semester. Hence, it possible to say that the translation of thoughts into written language has changed by the use of some strategies mentioned by Flower and Hayes such as the adaptation to the needs of the reader, monitoring, organizing

and planning since they have different goals and sub goals at this stage of written production than when writing an initial draft.

One of the biggest difficulties observed from the information of the focal groups and the interviews with the tutors occurred at macro-textual level. The document eighth and ninth semester students were writing lacked connection and relation at holistic level i.e. ideas, paragraphs and chapters lacked, to some extent, connection.

The isolation of the written parts of their document as mentioned by some tutors could be caused by the individual work of the members of some groups (chiefly in eighth semester) who mentioned working each on his or her own and then meeting to organize the information in one single text (see comments on section 7.1). It is not clear yet, if the purpose of the program Licenciatura en Lenguas Modernas Inglés y Francés at Universidad del Cauca of allowing students to work in groups of four, five and even six people could benefit or affect negatively the written production. As it is, writing individually is a complex process as argued by Flower and Hayes (1996) and the Didactext Group (2003).

If we observe table 2 and section 7.1 there are only two students in eighth semester and tutors advising these students mentioning lack of coherence. As mentioned above, at this stage, eighth semester students do not have clear many of their composition goals, and the document is immature. This means that they are not aware yet about macro-textual coherence importance, since they are more concerned to establish the objective of their research and have written a rough draft which includes abstract, introduction, rationale and objectives.

Moreover, ninth semester students are in a different stage of writing or in a more mature stage of composition. Hence, they have clarified more their composition goals, have gone deeper into the objective of their research and have written additional sections of the final paper including the problem statement, the theoretical framework, the results and the analysis.

In this stage of their final paper, ninth semester students presented more coherence difficulties than eighth semester students. As seen in table 2, coherence was the most common difficulty mentioned by ninth semester students, six students in total. A possible explanation for this lack of coherence in the text can be explained from the perspectives of Didactext Group (2003) and Flowers and Hayes (1996). For the Didactext Group, the process of composition from a global perspective is made up of many dimensions, the creation of a text involves three main components: culture, context and the mental process, each described in the theoretical framework. For Flower and Hayes, the writing process is the union of interwaved processes within a hierarchical structure, which also includes sociocultural and affective aspects (included in their updated model, 1996) such as the writer's self-perception about writing skills and motivation as seen in figure 2.

By observing figure 2 and the Didactext Group's theory, there are many elements lying in the composition process of one single writer. Now, let's consider that some groups have four or five students. The complex process of writing becomes even more complex because the different dimensions and elements of each writer contribute to the dynamics of the group, as seen in section 5.3. Notwithstanding the contributions by Moore (2003), Morss and Murray (2001), Pololi et al. (2004) and Ferguson (2009) about the positive effects in group writing, it is necessary to consider that most of these studies were carried out with

students of postgraduate degree studies who are assumed to be in a higher level of intellectual, academic and professional maturity. In contrast, it is possible that the individuals of this study do not have enough experience of working in groups to contribute to collective goals. Consequently, it is important to consider the socio- affective elements proposed by Forman and Katsky (1986) such as poor conflict management, personality differences and unresolved emotional issues and the motivation for carrying out the final research paper. In addition, it is important to consider the tension within the group which according to Ewald and MacCallum (1990), can influence the composition process either positively or negatively.

Moreover, one explanation of coherence and cohesion difficulties mentioned by two students in section 7.1. and by two tutors in section 7.3. might be found in Forman and Katsky (1986) studies i.e. by the tendency of students in groups to operate autonomously and conduct their part of the project on their own or as stated by Sormunen, Lehtiö and Heinström (2011) when students split group work assignments into individually conducted projects. Thus, if for example we consider the analogy of different people writing a different part of a novel each, in which, all of the writers know the objective and topic we may find that while the discussion is about the same topic, the connection and flow between the parts of this novel may not be well-achieved.

As seen in the result section, it is hard for these students to achieve coherence in their text, not only for the reasons presented above but also because to write an academic text such as the final paper represents for them the highest challenge in their undergraduate academic life, and most of them have not had training to write such a lengthy and structured text throughout the subjects of the program.

As in the case of coherence, rhetorical difficulties were more common in ninth semester students than in eighth semester students. As seen in section 7.1 and table 2, during the focal group with eighth semester students there was only one comment by students about having difficulties with rhetoric. In this case, it is possible that as occurred with coherence, at this stage of writing, students were more concerned about other aspects of the text related to content but not form. However, the comment by the tutor, in this case an English native speaker, shows that it is normal that students transfer oral and written elements of Spanish into English e.g. when they write very long sentences to express an idea, when they include informal elements of oral communication into the text, etc.

Additionally, it is possible to observe that the focal group with ninth semester students provided more comments about having difficulties with rhetoric when writing in English, six in total (see table 2). As stated above, if we consider ninth semester students as more experienced writers than eighth semester, then, we can say that the quantity of comments observed in this section shows their concern about the general organization of the text, that is, the form as stated by Roca de Larios, Murphy and Manchón (1999), in contrast to eighth semester students.

However, as in the case of eighth semester students, the biggest problems in relation to rhetoric seemed to be linked to the lack of concrete development of ideas in short and precise sentences and repetition of a single idea in many different parts of the document. It is possible that, rhetoric as well as punctuation can be transferred consciously or unconsciously from L1 to foreign language writing.

Nevertheless, it is possible this problem in rhetoric can be a consequence of writing a formal document such as the final research paper for the first time in last semesters of the

program with no training about formal English writing during the previous semesters. Such training could take place in the form of reading formal English documents such as articles, essays and publications in order for students to get used to English rhetoric at academic level.

As stated by Delmastro and Salazar (2004) learners bring with themselves a series of previous knowledge from their mother tongue (rhetorical, phonological, morphological, syntactical and semantic conceptions). These elements are believed to be facilitators to acquire a foreign language. However, the difficulties mentioned by students and tutors in sections 7.1, 7.2 and 7.3 show a lack of competence in the formal language elements in L1 and these are being transferred to L2 writing.

Based on the transfer theory of Santrock (2002) and the transfer competence concept by Cummins (1981), it is possible to say that the previous knowledge, or as in this case, poor competence in L1 writing, acts as an obstacle to good performance in foreign language writing, causing most of the problems of translation mentioned by the students.

However, there are other difficulties expressed by them which are related to poor competence in the foreign language for example, use of prepositions, phrasal verbs and verb forms. In this case eighth and ninth semester students should have enough English competence to avoid these difficulties, after having been through a process of English language instruction. Hence, it would be necessary to go deeper into the possible causes of this lack of competence at program level and at student's level as well.

### 8.3 OTHER DIFFICULTIES AND POSSIBLE CAUSES

Although the difficulties presented above were the most representative in terms of frequency and importance given by students from eighth and ninth semesters and tutors, there are other difficulties reported during the focal groups and interviews.

The lack of the appropriate vocabulary to write a formal document was observed mainly in eighth semester students, who claimed that they are not using the correct words and collocations in their writing. It is necessary to keep in mind that this final document they are writing explores different specific topics in English language learning and teaching research. Hence, it seems that students at this stage of writing face this difficulty, which is practically nonexistent in ninth semester results. It is possible that this vocabulary difficulty is due to the fact that eighth semester students are reviewing literature and acquiring the specific vocabulary, as mentioned by one tutor in section 7.3.

Notwithstanding this possible explanation, not all the failures in the vocabulary should be explained by it. In some cases, basic vocabulary is not assimilated by students throughout the program maybe because they do not use strategies which allow them to keep new vocabulary in long-term memory. Moreover, it is possible that poor reading habits lead to students not acquiring new lexicon as mentioned by one tutor in section 7.3.

Additionally, one of the tutors mentioned that in some cases eighth semester students tended to use non-standard English vocabulary in their work e.g. the use of the word *weed* to refer marihuana or cannabis, or use informal lexicon in formal writing e.g. *have got, don't, you're, haven't* etc. One of the answers in section 7.1 makes reference to that fact that they are expected to write in such formal way but they feel they have not had the appropriate training in this sense during the early semesters of the program. Then, they have to overcome this challenge while writing the document. Additionally, as seen in the possible cause of lack

of vocabulary, poor autonomous reading habits among the students throughout the program can affect significantly the way they are writing since they are not aware of formal language use in literature e.g. articles, scientific publications, other final research papers etc.

According to the academic syllabus presented in section 6.1, students are not trained to use *APA* rules which are required to present the final research paper. As referred in some comments in section 7.1, students claim that they review this formal style of presentation for the first time when they are in the final stages of the paper writing. Hence, students present some difficulties in quoting and supporting their ideas because they simply do not know how to do it.

## 9. CONCLUSIONS

This study attempted to show some of the difficulties faced when writing a final research paper by students in eighth and ninth semester of the program Licenciatura en Lenguas Modernas Inglés-Francés in Universidad del Cauca.

Throughout the collection of data by using focal groups and interviews it was possible to achieve the objective of the study i.e. identify, categorize, analyze and explore these difficulties, which were reflected in the comments by both students and tutors.

The results and the analysis of this study did not attempt to criticize the program, the curriculum or teachers' methodology. On the contrary, this study is aimed at contributing to improve some issues to avoid future generations of students having to face the same difficulties. As stated in the rationale section; this study provides a foundation for future work to enhance the quality of the program.

Moreover, this study allowed me to reflect about many linguistic and cultural elements involved in foreign language learning which were part of my own education in the Master Program in teaching English as a foreign language.

## **9.1 FUTURE WORK**

As mentioned above, this study might serve as a foundation to reformulate or propose mechanisms throughout the program which improve writing skills, chiefly in academic English. Certainly, this is just one mere viewpoint of what is happening in the program at one specific time. Hence, it is possible that this phenomenon changes over time and it would be necessary to reformulate the parameters of the study. Nevertheless, it is probable that the difficulties shown in the study and their possible causes do not change significantly over some years.

By exploring the difficulties of these students it is possible to say that there are some strategies which can be developed throughout the curriculum. Obviously, the creation of an academic writing course would be the best alternative to develop writing skills, but it would be a long term solution which would imply political, economic and academic considerations.

Nevertheless, it is possible to include some of the strategies explained below in the existing syllabi of English courses such as Inglés II, III, IV or V, Taller de Inglés, Literatura en Inglés I and II and Comunicación intercultural en Inglés.

### **a. Foster academic reading during early semesters**

As stated by one of the interviewed tutors, students do not concern themselves with reading as part of autonomous learning. Hence, it is necessary to foster reading of articles or scientific magazines or even other research papers in printed version at UNIDPEL (library for the development of the educational practice of language teachers) or through the different data bases of Universidad del Cauca e.g. J Store, EBSCO among others . The reading of academic texts could help towards the development of vocabulary, use of punctuation and awareness of certain rhetorical features of academic English.

**b. Encouraging academic writing during early semesters**

Developing academic writing skills is a long-term process which must be practiced since the very beginning. As stated by one interviewed tutor:

“Trying to make a thesis be the very first formal, academic writing in your academic life, it's cruel“.

Hence, the program of Lenguas Modernas should change this aspect by considering that when the students in eighth semester start writing their research paper, they have not had any other similar experience of academic writing. Therefore, it is important that throughout different courses they face the complexity of this task and have academic writing experiences which help them to write the final research paper.

**c. Develop coherence and cohesion awareness through writing practices**

As a result of this study, hopefully teachers in the program of Lenguas Modernas in Universidad del Cauca will consider cohesion and coherence difficulties when designing writing practices. As shown in the results and analysis there are serious problems at micro and macro textual structure of the texts. Consequently, these are two big difficulties to tackle through constant practice in the different courses.

**d. Raise awareness about group writing and writing as a process**

Tutors could spend some time identifying group conflict elements and analyze possible strategies to solve them. In addition, students should learn to view writing as a flexible process from goal setting to editing. Thus, working on one activity of the process may lead to rethinking another.

**e. Encourage the use of formal citation in most of the writing exercises**

Notwithstanding the use APA style was not as significant as other difficulties, it is important that the students start developing competences in academic writing from early semesters so that they will be more familiar with its use when writing the final paper or an academic publication.

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## **APPENDICES**

### **APPENDIX 1.**

**Carlos Quijano Almeida**

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**Faculty of Educational Science**

**Focal group base questions with eighth and ninth semester students**

- a.** What are your strengths and weaknesses in writing in English?
- b.** How have you felt about writing in English during the entire program? Has this relationship with writing changed over time as you have progressed through the degree?
- c.** From your point of view, how could writing difficulties be tackled in the program?  
What could have been done differently so that you would have experienced fewer difficulties?
- d.** How would you compare your writing abilities in Spanish and English?
- e.** What do you do when you receive feedback or a grade from your teachers upon handing in a writing assignment?
- f.** How would you describe the evaluation process in your degree when it comes to writing? Do you get feedback? What kind of feedback? How often? What happens after you get feedback? Do you know what to do with the feedback you receive? Do you act upon the feedback?

## **APPENDIX 2.**

**Carlos Quijano Almeida**

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**Questions for tutors' interviews**

- a.** What group or groups are you currently advising?
- b.** What is your main function in the group or groups you are currently advising?
- c.** Are you a research paper reader of other groups?
- d.** What do you consider are the weakness and strengths of these students in writing?
- e.** When students present you their writings, do you give them feedback? And what do you do with that feedback and what do your students do with that feedback?
- f.** Do you think that the essays they are writing are in an academic English? Do these essays let them to improve their writing skill when writing the thesis?
- g.** What do you think is necessary to change in the program in order to tackle these weaknesses in writing?