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**Summary Writing as a Means to Improve the Second
Language, the Mother Tongue, and Mental
Organization**

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Summary Writing as a Means to Improve the Second Language, the Mother Tongue, and Mental Organization

Maria Rosaria D’Acierno

Abstract

Writing has always been a problem either in the foreign language or in the mother tongue. Besides linguistic lack, the main problem concerns how to mentally organize a formal text. Of course, from the linguistic point of view, nowadays students are not enough familiar with formal language, since reading is considered a boring activity (Algorzata Marzec Stawiarska 2016). Cellular phones are not entirely to be blamed, rather laziness. In fact, it is really demanding to cover even a conversation if the theme requires wellstructured sentences in order to build a coherent as well as a cohesive discourse (Frey and Fisher 2003). In my own opinion the teacher of a foreign language should work hand in hand with the teacher of the mother tongue, because in either cases they have to build up a richer language from both the grammatical and semantic point of view. Most of our students show linguistic deficiency in their mother tongue first of all, and until they do not achieve a satisfactory linguistic level in their first language, any effort in the foreign language will be vain (Corbeil 2000). Our experiment, in fact, tried to follow a precise schedule. In both classes (Italian and English), the teachers stimulated their students (IV High School) to read passages (mostly taken from well-known novelists) with the precise intent to ask their students to summarize them (Hood 2008). In this way, this activity associates two important skills – reading and writing – while offering a variety of cultural data. These skills are essential during our students’ academic development, especially when they are asked to interact with their teachers about the subjects studied. By giving them precise steps to follow before writing a summary, teachers enable their students to face orally formal discourse, too and not only a simple conversation with occasional friends. Reading with the purpose of summarizing the passage gives this skill a precise goal, so that the learner has to focus on different steps from two points: 1) the value of the meaning (the whole meaning of the passage, the message included, the various ways to spread the message, the details which highlight the main message), and 2) the linguistic side (vocabulary, grammatical-syntactical structures, the use of tenses, connectives, punctuation, etc.). While pursuing this aim, the student not only improves his/her language, but also learns how to capture the essence of the passage, to memorize the whole plot, and to organize it in his/her own words. In our experiment we decided to ask a group of students (9) to work individually, while others (9) were assigned to triads (Sajedi 2014). Our premise was that working individually offers students a better concentration as well as a deeper effort on personal resources. In doing so, the student also acquires much more confidence in his/her own capacities (Shehadeh 2011). The results obtained at the end of the course, (moving time by time the groups and the single students) gave reasons to our expectations.

Keywords: summary writing, reading, memory, triads and individual students

Introduction

The general purpose of this study is to increase, in a classroom environment, formal communication by using reading and writing; of course, never neglecting the other two skills: listening and speaking. Our research focuses on reading as a means to develop the writing of a good précis, which, in its turn, contributes to improve: 1) memory, vocabulary and grammatical-syntactical structures; in brief, the organization of a correct discourse in both the oral and the written language. The experiment includes the foreign as well as the students' first language, since it wants also to investigate the influence of one language on the other. Furthermore, it wants to enlarge the results concerning the great problem related to transfer; in other words if, in this limited area (reading and summary writing), it is the L1, as generally proved, which influences L2 or vice versa. Undoubtedly, the acquisition of the first and the foreign language follows two different processes, one based on spontaneous development, the other on systematic and sequentially instructions offered by a specialized teacher. A general statement refers to the influence of one's own mother tongue on the foreign language, just because the advantage knowledge of the first language and the previous experience attached to the meaning of its words lead the foreign language student to a simple translation of words without caring about their cultural implications. In so doing, the first language shows a deep influence on the foreign one, depriving words, linguistic expressions and gestures of their cultural features. Students automatically translate words and structures taking advantage of their previous experience; thus, neglecting the inner sense coming from traditions and ways of life. For this reason, it becomes essential to teach the cultural data of the foreign language in parallel with its formal aspect.

Reading and writing are considered fundamental skills for a correct and rich linguistic development. These two abilities are the most difficult ones, since they imply a higher linguistic level: the one based on formal communication. In addition, they both require concentration, attention, and a good capability to memorize as well as to analyse the content read, in order to be able to reproduce it in a personal style. In this experiment, the students (18year olds) are supposed to have a solid base in their mother tongue, and an acceptable knowledge in the foreign language. However, the actual situation is not so simple. Even adult students seem not mature enough to face either the learning of a foreign language or any writing formal exercise in their mother tongue. Not being able to rely on spontaneous learning, as it often happens with children, they need more concentration, more patience and more time. Then, another problem interferes with them when facing formal language; that is, the one related to their frequent use of informal communication, due to scarce occasions of official meetings. Reading and summary writing should offer them the chance to acquire a higher linguistic level in both their mother tongue and the foreign language. Of course, because the experiment was attached to the school curriculum of fourth grade high school students (Liceo Scientifico), the teachers decided to consider texts belonging to 1) the English literature (Harry Potter, Aldus Huxley, George Orwell); 2) natural environment (land resources, food, weather); 3) scientific resources (fine

materials, new technologies); 4) atmosphere (pollution, solar energy), and 5) articles from newspapers (political debates, immigration, religion).

Even though the schedule to follow when constructing a summary writing is the same either concerning a literary or a scientific passage, of course the points to memorize and to focus on are different, and the difference also concerns the lexical aspect, which includes a special register: 1) literary, 2) scientific, 3) political, and 4) journalistic. By submitting students to languages for specific purposes, teachers offer them the opportunity to interact within different situations either involving the understanding skill or the use of a correct terminology.

Our assumption was that, working separately offers students more occasions to improve their task, in opposition to a recent trend, in which some scholars suggest, from both theoretical and pedagogical considerations, that collaborative work in the L2 classroom helps students to achieve a better knowledge in the foreign language.

In our experiment we decided to ask a group of students (9) to work individually, while others (9) were assigned to triads as suggested by Sajedi, who said that “positive interdependence in collaboratively learning occasions leads students to encourage and help each others’ efforts while sharing ideas and pooling their knowledge to achieve one common goal. ... collaborative writing fosters the development of second language writing through increasing engagement, confidence, and responsibility on the parts of the learners.”¹ The control group did not follow any specific strategies, and proceeded their foreign language learning scheme as suggested by the school curriculum.

Philosophical and Social Perspective

While talking about the different cultural meaning attached to words, a socio-philosophical parenthesis needs to be discussed, even though in this experiment, mostly centred on a didactic situation, philosophy and sociology are not prevalent issues. When analyzing the problem concerning the meaning attached to words from the psychological point of view, we have also to consider the connection between words and thoughts; that is to say, when words refer to the speaker’s personal experience, which, in its turn, reflects the social involvement of the subject. As Sergio Piro writes in *La scacchiera maledetta* (a kind of trap, in which every move is controlled, his research about mental illness), communication does not essentially mean the use of conventional words/signs, rather it means to use a series of unconventional, spontaneous, immediate alternatives, which, through mediation, inevitably become conventional, even though they are subject to another changing according to the feeling of the speaker. Linguistic crystallization (sistema doxico – monotetico; rozzezza del linguaggio convenzionale), as Piro calls the symbolic meaning attached to words, reflects the flow of social events; events which are totally different from the personal, internal happenings of the

¹Sajedi S. P., Collaborative Summary Writing and EFL. Students’ L2 Development, in *Procedia Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 98, 2014: 1650-1657; cfr. Kung S., Evaluation of a team model of digital language exchange, in *recall*, 14, 2002: 315-326; *Writing in Foreign Language Contexts* (Manchón.Rosa M. eds.), Multilingual Matters, Bristol-Buffalo-Toronto, 2009;

single subject. For this reason conventional words are not the best way to describe inner thoughts.

La parola, che pur aveva così determinanti possibilità di essere riferita agli eventi del mondo esterno, alle azioni e ai rapporti sociali, ad altre parole fra loro connesse, non sembrava invece potersi riferire con altrettanta facilità agli accadimenti interiori più ricchi e complessi, agli stati d'animo, alla gamma degli *Erlebenisse*, agli affioramenti, alle irruzioni, alle discontinuità, all'intuire, al presentire, al progettare, alle concatenazioni intrecciate della interiorità, così straordinariamente diverse dalle leggi causali macroscopiche della natura.²

Vygotsky's inner speech reflects Piro's inner thoughts. In fact, Vygotsky says that inner speech lies "beyond the semantic plane. It is a speech for oneself" while "external speech is a speech for others." For this reason, external speech uses conventional signs, which trap the meaning reducing it to a series of predictable issues. External speech is conventional; it is the speech of the motionless things, those things that cannot speak any longer; they need a new language as Hofmannsthal says in *Lettre de Lord Chandos*, because language is inadequate and limited. Silence is Hofmannsthal's answer to solve this problem (Wittgenstein, Weininger).³ The idioms used among youths, friends, relatives, etc. also belong to the category of inner speech, in the sense that words acquire a different meaning, only comprehensible among the people belonging to the same environment.

There is an argot used and understood only by street children. In inner speech, the same kind of idiom develops – the kind that is difficult to translate into the language of ordinary communicative speech. ... Inner speech is to a large extent thinking in pure meanings. It is a dynamic, shifting, unstable thing, fluttering between word and thought, the two more or less stable, more or less firmly delineated components of verbal thought.⁴

Theoretical perspective, by following Vygotsky's theory (social constructivist perspective of learning), affirms that human development is a social activity. In order to prove his statements, the child becomes Vygotsky's central figure. In fact, the child's cognitive and linguistic development arises during social interaction with other members of his/her context. These people help children interact within their social group, by assisting and stimulating them, with a series of educational supports, during their development process (*scaffolding*). Such scaffolding, some scholars say (Alegríade la Colina and García Mayo, 2007; Kuiken and Vedder, 2002; Swain, 2010; Swain, Lapkin, Knouzi, Suzuki and Brooks, 2009), might be applied also in an L2 learning program. From the pedagogical side, collaborative pair or group work in L2 learning context provides students with a more relaxed atmosphere; thus, reducing the stress of facing the teacher directly. As McDonough says:

²Piro S., *La scacchiera maledetta*, Tempi Moderni Edizioni, Napoli, 1980: 18.

³New York Review Book, translated by Joel Rotenberg, 2005.

⁴Vygotsky L., *Thought and Language*, The MIT Press, 1987: 249.

Pair and small group activities provide learners with more time to speak the target language than teacher-fronted activities, promote learner autonomy and self-directed learning, and give instructors opportunities to work with individual learners. In addition, learners may feel less anxious and more confident when interacting with peers during pair or small group activities than during whole-class discussion.⁵

‘Languaging,’ as Swain and Lapkin call the process of “mediating cognitively complex ideas using language,” interferes with our memory while people speak or write, and, at the same time, elevates the role of language by giving it “the power to mediate attention, recall, and knowledge creation.”⁶ Under this view, by following Vygotsky’s theory (language develops memory and attention – the highest mental functions), teachers’ first aim is to promote verbal and written communication during their students’ academic development, because, in so doing, they develop their general cognitive growth through communication. Effective communication is supported by a deep knowledge of the language used, from the syntactic as well as the semantic and cultural side. The meaning of words is the most responsible linguistic detail which drives the child’s interaction within the cultural group he/she belongs to. Language acquisition starts with single short words and simple gestures; then, step by step, the child builds up his/her strategy, which permits to link sound and meaning. In fact, as Vygotsky says, from the side of the psychology of speech, a “sound detached from meaning immediately loses all the characteristics that make it a sound of human speech” (:9). When learning the meaning of new words, as it happens to students while reading a passage either in the mother tongue or in the foreign language, in order to really understand both the new words and the new passage, it is necessary to go through a specific phase, which permits to transfer on the new words a complete experience. The teacher needs to make visible the new meaning. My strategy, in order to let students capture the real sense of single words and of the full passage, thus, ‘making thinking visible,’ as Jennifer Serravallo says, is to attach words a cultural experience. This happens because, even though very often there is a complete correspondence between the word and its object, words are not isolated items, rather, they are linked to a complete atmosphere, to a full experience. Vygotsky calls this phenomenon ‘generalization.’

Closer study of the development of understanding and communication in childhood, however, has led to the conclusion that real communication requires meaning – that is generalization – as much as signs. In order to convey one’s experience or thought, it is imperative to refer them to some known class or group of phenomena. ... communication presupposes generalization and development of word meaning; ... Such generalization would refer my

⁵McDonough K., Learner-learner interaction during pair and small group activities in a Thai EFL context, in *System*, 32, 2004: 207-224;

⁶Swain M. and Lapkin S., Languaging as Agent and Constituent of Cognitive Change in an Older adult: An Example, in *Canada Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 14, 2011: 104-117; Schmidt, R. (2001). Attention. In P. Robinson (eds.), *Cognition and second language instruction*, 2001: 3-32, Cambridge, England, Cambridge University Press.

experience to the class of phenomena known to my interlocutor. That is why certain thoughts cannot be communicated to children even if they are familiar with the necessary words.⁷

Much of the recent work in reading comprehension instruction has focused on making thinking visible. In that vein, we model a repertoire of strategies that support readers to understand what they read.⁸

When talking about ‘generalization,’ Vygotsky refers to children during their general cognitive growth process, but, if we apply his last sentence of the above quotation within a program concerning the learning of a foreign language, we underline the importance of offering students the possibility to know the cultural data of the tongue studied. When language and culture are separated, it is very difficult either to establish a satisfactory communication or to achieve a real comprehension of a reading text. While getting familiar with culture, we develop and mature a series of concepts in our mind; thus, adding new notions reflecting our experience in the new language. Once established a series of new concepts, it is easier to find the corresponding word. Leon Tolstoy in his *Pedagogical Writings*, when he faces the problem concerning the relation of words to thoughts, declares that words are easily retained if they are attached to experience: “there is a word available nearly always when the concept has matured.”⁹

Didactic Perspective

Going back to our didactic theme – reading and summary writing –, I have to say that writing has always been a problem either in the foreign language or in the mother tongue. Besides linguistic lack, the main concern is how to mentally organize a formal text. Of course, from the linguistic point of view, especially nowadays, students are not enough familiar with formal language, since reading is considered a boring activity. In order to stimulate the reading skill Malgorzata Marzec Stawiarska suggests to introduce the practice of summary writing. In her case, summary writing is viewed only as a stimulus to increase the pleasure of reading. As a consequence, the quality of the summaries is not considered important. At last, in her study, summarising had a positive influence on reading development. She says that, after the experiment, in which two groups were asked to read the same texts, the control group scored a lower level compared to the experimental group whose students were asked to regularly write a summary of a reading text. The control group was engaged in the

⁷Vygotsky L., *Thought and Language*, The MIT Press, 1987: 7-8-9.

⁸Serravallo J., *The writing strategies book: your everything guide to developing skilled writers*, Heinemann, Portsmouth, 2017:vii.

⁹Tolstoy L., *Leo Tolstoy's Writing on Education* (eds. Bob Blaisdell), Teachers and Writers Collaborative, New York, 2000: 143.

typical FL reading tasks concerning multiple choice questions, true/false statements and matching exercises.¹⁰

L2 writers may experience difficulty incorporating source text information into their own writing because of low reading comprehension skills and limits on their vocabulary knowledge.¹¹

Cellular phones are not entirely to be blamed, as the cause of poor reading, rather laziness. In fact, it is demanding to cover even a conversation if the theme requires well structured sentences in order to build a coherent as well as a cohesive discourse. This problem involves not only the foreign language, but the mother tongue, too. That is why, our experiment suggests to cover the writing skill as a means to stimulate reading and formal debates among adolescents. Frey and Fisher present their research, whose aim was to improve the students' level of formal English in an American school (San Diego, California), to prove that young people need to follow a precise strategy to improve the skills belonging to their mother tongue. They applied the LEA (Language Experience Approach), which consists in "a shared reading or read-aloud first thing in the morning – 7:30 when the bell rang. ... Following the read-aloud, the students received some form of writing instructions for approximately 20 minutes. The balance of the class time was spent independently reading or working in group activities, which included the use of a word wall, word-making activities, vocabulary development, and test readiness." Those students needed instructions before starting their writing exercises "for two reasons. First, the students' writing samples suggested that they did not understand the speech-to-print connection. ... they also did not understand the different registers of language and the more complex language used in formal writing. Second, none of the students were willing to write in front of peers."¹² The experiment focused on the linguistic aspect very heavily. In fact, reading was associated to discourse analysis, and each passage tried to pick up the meaning of unknown words as well as their use within both the context and the content: "Deep knowledge of the students' control of words and vocabulary, and especially their understanding of structural analysis, is vital to an interactive writing lesson."¹³

Under the premises attested by Frey and Fisher, who acted with a class of native speakers, in which writing was used to increase the level of the mother tongue, we, too, wanted to introduce this program to investigate both the foreign language and the mother tongue. However, in my own opinion, the teacher of a foreign language

¹⁰Stawiarska M.M., The influence of summary writing on the development of reading skills, in *System*, vol 59, 2016: 90-99.

¹¹McDonough K., Crawford W.J., De Vleeschhauer J., Summary writing in a Thai EFL university context, in *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 24, 2014: 20-32; cfr. Segev-Miller R., Writing from sources: The effect of explicit instructions on college students' processes and products, in *Educational Studies in Language and Literature*, 4, 2004: 5-33; cfr. Leki I., Learning to write in a second language: Multilingual graduates and undergraduates expanding genre repertoires, in *Learning to write and writing to learning an additional language*, Mancón R. eds., 2011: 85-109.

¹²Fisher D. and Frey N., Writing instruction for struggling adolescent readers: A gradual release model, in *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 46 (5), January 2003: 298.

¹³Idem:400.

should always work hand in hand with the teacher of the mother tongue, because in either cases they have to build up a richer language from the grammatical, the semantic and the cultural point of view. Most of our students show linguistic deficiency in their mother tongue first of all, and until they do not achieve a satisfactory linguistic level in their first language, any effort in the foreign language will be vain. Our research, in fact, tried to follow a precise schedule. In both classes (Italian and English), the teachers stimulated their students (IV grade High School) to read passages (mostly taken from well known novelists) with the precise intent to summarize them.¹⁴ In this way, this activity associates two important skills – reading and writing – while offering a variety of cultural data. These skills are essential for our students’ academic development, especially when they are asked to interact with their teachers about school subjects. By giving students precise steps to follow before writing a summary, teachers enable them to face orally formal discourse, too, and not only a simple conversation with occasional friends.

Of course, during any educational program, but especially in a foreign language learning plan, the teacher covers a very important role, not only from the teaching perspective, but also from the pedagogical side. By enhancing a correct pedagogical encounter with her/his students, the teacher will decode and, consequently, unravel obstacles, both linguistic and psychological, more easily. Even though he/she has to follow a precise, educational rhythm by projecting various steps, which will drive students to achieve a final object, the teacher’s behaviour should resemble that of an older friend, and not that of a judge. S/he should make projects, plans and proposals by asking the students’ opinion, by considering their expectations, and not only presenting them a schedule similar to a ritual to be precisely followed. The classroom is not the audience of a theatre, in which spectators “remained isolated and unreflective viewers of the action.” Students working in a classroom project should not passively follow their teacher who acts “as a protagonist - or even worse, an evangelist – for dominant cultural, economic, or ethical interests.”¹⁵ In so doing, the teacher, by acting as a *liminal servant*, will acquire his/her students’ trust and friendship, while enforcing their confidence in their own capabilities. The notion of the *liminal servant* comes from Urban T. Holmes, who, while describing the role of the priest within his community, goes beyond the hierarchy as established by society. The priest, acting as a *liminal servant*, leaves his position of ‘a hero,’ and turns it into that of a servant, who balances between giving instructions and receiving suggestions: “The priest as hero becomes a servant of reason and its less rigorous ally, common sense.”¹⁶ Even in a session dedicated to improve patients’ behaviour in a mental health department, the role between researchers and their patients is never fixed, rather they both need to invent and re-combine new strategies. The teacher, by getting the position of a *liminal servant* in a classroom context, seems to understand his/her students’ motivation and expectations much better, so that he/she gives students the inputs they expect to receive from their teacher. The teacher has to apply a

¹⁴Hood S., Summary writing in academic contexts: Implicating meaning in processes of change, in *Linguistics and Education*, 19, 2008: 351-365.

¹⁵McLaren P., *The Liminal Servant and the Ritual Roots of Critical Pedagogy*, Chapman University Digital Commons, Chapman University: 164-180.

¹⁶Holmes U. T., *The Priest in Community*, The Seabury Press, New York: 61.

chronodetic pause (Pausa cronodetica Piro-Mele:41), which means he has to think about new ideas, to compare them with those of his students; thus, examining the teaching as well as the learning atmosphere. In so doing, boredom as well as mental laziness are avoided. Students and patients in both the above situations acquire the role of efficient actors.¹⁷ In brief, the one who has the responsibility of conducting a session enhancing both behaviour and learning, should never acquire the position of a judge, rather s/he has to establish a true relationship with his/her patients/students, while enhancing a relaxed atmosphere. Also from this perspective we are inclined to think that working individually will produce better effects.

Reading and Writing

As Walter J. Ong says, reading and writing are strictly linked one another. By practising reading, we emphasize the importance of the oral language, which, in its turn, helps us understand the essence of the writing skill, and how this skill influences the activity of our brain. During our experiment, reading has been practiced both as a silent and aloud exercise. Reading silently is the first phase of our schedule, since it gives students the chance to concentrate on the meaning of the passage. The reader, in fact, has not to go through the difficult paths related to pronunciation and intonation: phonetic and phonological issues. Reading silently, also, follows the student's time, who can stop, think about, look for the exact meaning of unknown words, etc. After reading the passage two or three times, and grasped its general meaning, then an aloud reading is asked. Now students will be able to give their reading a correct intonation by stressing those words whose meaning seems important to communicate the real essence of the text. Reading aloud, in fact, is considered of prime importance for literacy development, especially for the sophisticated language of literature; it strengthens students' cognitive abilities. During this phase, reading aloud has been practiced by each subject in front of the two groups (the triads and the one working separately). In so doing, the students have the opportunity to listen to one another and to focus on language patterns as well as on intonation, which is another detail that increases the meaning of the passage. It is of no doubt that a correct intonation gives value to any text, because pitch changes, by adding a variety of overtones, increase the level of doubt, interrogation, surprise, certainty; thus, clearly shaping the meaning of the message. Furthermore, another problem arises concerning the English language, that is the unfamiliarity of the students with its non-phonetic pronunciation. Moreover, most of the time, they perceive the foreign sounds in terms of their own language. As a consequence, in order to correct both levels, the one related to pitch (tone-deaf), and the one linked to phonetic mistakes (the

¹⁷Piro S., Mele A., *I Mille Talenti*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 1995 "Esercitazioni di diversissimo tipo e contenuto vengono continuamente e sistematicamente proposte, in forme sempre diverse, dai ricercatori agli allievi e dagli stessi agli allievi dei gruppi successivi ... le esercitazioni sono un formidabile rimedio contro la noia e la pigrizia mentale, ... Perciò le esercitazioni possono dirsi connessionali in quanto valorizzano quei sistemi connessionalidi ordine superiore che sono la scoperta e l'invenzione.": 56, 58.

foreign language student is called half-deaf, not in the sense that he/she does not hear the sound, but in the sense that he/she is not able to perceive the slightest difference between one phoneme and another – sound discrimination), we trained students to read aloud. Reading aloud will let students acquire the ability to convey emotions, surprise, fear, happiness, etc., all details which add more pathos to the message read.

It is clear that some kind of meaning is conveyed by the intonation of connected speech in both tone languages and non-tone languages. ... one kind of meaning conveyed is, however, clearly social and emotional ... Intonation can express social attitudes: speaker to listener ...¹⁸

... la voce non è solo lo strumento di realizzazione del piano del significante, ed in quanto tale, in un certo senso, ancella del significato, ma è anche strumento, per così dire, autoreferenziale, portatore e generatore di sensi in sé ...¹⁹

By giving emphasis to the practice of reading aloud, so stressing the importance of tones and pitches, we try to overpass the limits of the written language as well as the strict meaning attached to words by colouring them with new nuances derived by our emotions and reactions. Writing, with its linguistic features out of context, in the sense that it cannot be immediately discussed with its author, has greatly shaped the human mind. As a consequence, especially during a didactic process, in which language has a central role, reading, by guiding students towards a proper, correct writing development, also enlarges the limited borders of formal communication.

Una più profonda comprensione dell'oralità primaria ci permette di capire meglio anche il nuovo mondo della scrittura, la sua essenza, e come essa influisca sugli esseri umani ristrutturandone, direttamente o indirettamente, i processi mentali. Senza la scrittura, un individuo alfabetizzato non saprebbe e non potrebbe pensare nel modo in cui lo fa, non solo quando è impegnato a scrivere, ma anche quando si esprime in forma orale. La scrittura ha trasformato la mente umana più di qualsiasi altra invenzione.²⁰

Reading, with the purpose of summarizing the passage read, gives this skill a precise goal, so that, the learner has to focus on different steps from two points: 1) the value of the meaning (the whole meaning of the passage, the message included, the various ways to spread the message, the details which highlight the main message), and 2) the linguistic side (vocabulary, grammatical-syntactical structures, the use of tenses, connectives, punctuation, etc.). While pursuing this aim, the student not only

¹⁸Bolinger D. (eds.), *Intonation*, Penguin Education, England, 1972: 259: cfr. O'Connor, *Phonetics*, Pelican Books, 1973;

¹⁹This quotation might be referred to the personal reaction the student has when he/she picks up corollary segments from the main message according to his/her personal experience (page 9). De Dominicis A. (eds.), *La voce come bene culturale*, Carocci Editore, 2002: 52.

²⁰Ong W. J., *Oralità e scrittura*, Il Mulino, Bologna:119.

improves his/her language, but also learns how to capture the essence of the passage, to memorize the whole plot, and to organize it in his/her own words.

A factor essential in understanding the intricacies involved in writing and the effect of task complexity in writing and language learning and development is the role of working memory capacity in writing processes.²¹

Going back to the question related to students interaction within a classroom context, even recognizing the benefits derived from a relaxing context established among peers, and the many stimuli received by this situation, especially when the aim is the linguistic improvement in both the mother tongue and the learning of a foreign language, in the specific case, in which the request is the writing of a précis, we think that, working individually gives students the occasion to better concentrate on their own memory, their own impressions, and the construction of grammatical structures based on correct lexicon. By following these lines, students will be trained to write a text that shows cohesion, while it is coherent to the source passage. We should also consider that, the précis requested is a personal and not a collaborative piece of work. Storch shows some doubts about collaborative writing and attests that only “very few studies have investigated the nature of such collaboration when students produce a jointly written text. ... they have examined learners’ attitudes to group/pair work in general, rather than to the activity of collaborative writing.” Thus, even considering the benefits of collaborative work for the spoken discourse, our statement, in opposition to the theories promoting collaborative writing, was that working individually offers students better concentration, as well as deeper effort on personal resources, giving students the chance to build up self-esteem. Consequently, the student also acquires much more confidence in his/her own capabilities. The results obtained, at the end of the course, (moving from time to time the triads) gave proof of our expectations.

As an important assumption, I should stress that any approach to second language should be viewed as an improvement for the mother tongue, too.²²

²¹Ruiz-Funes M., Exploring the potential of second/foreign language writing for language learning: The effects of task factors and learner variables, in *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 28, 2015: 1-19; cfr. Kuiken F. and Vedder I., Syntactic complexity, lexical variation and accuracy as a function of task complexity and proficiency level in L2 writing and speaking, in *Dimensions in L2 performance*, Housen A., Kuiken F., Vedder I. eds., Philadelphia/Amsterdam, J. Benjamins, 2012: 143-170; Kellogg R.T., Competition for working memory among writing processes, in *American Journal of Psychology*, 114: 175-191; Baddeley A.D. and Logie R.H., Working memory: The multiple component model, in *Models of working memory: Mechanisms of active maintenance and executive control*, Mihake A. and Shah P. eds. New York, Cambridge University Press, 1999: 28-61. According to Baddeley ‘working memory’ is short-term memory. In the phonological loop we find “part of working memory that deals with spoken and written material. It can be used to remember a phone number. It consists of two parts: 1) **Phonological Store** (inner ear) - Linked to speech perception. Holds information in a speech-based form (i.e., spoken words) for 1-2 seconds. 2) **Articulatory control process** (inner voice) – Linked to speech production. Used to rehearse and store verbal information from the phonological store” Baddeley and Hitch G., Working Memory, in *The psychology of learning and motivation: Advances in research and theory*, Bower G.H. eds., vol. VIII, 1974: 47-90.

²²“Those who know nothing of foreign languages know nothing of their own” says Johann Wolfgang Goethe.

Vygotsky, again talking about children development, stresses this notion very clearly. He affirms that, even though the two processes (acquiring spontaneously the mother tongue and learning in a formal setting the foreign language) are very different, and “experimental studies fully endorse this,” it has been proved that “a child’s understanding of his native language is enhanced by learning a foreign one.”²³ As a consequence, the two languages should work in pair. In other words, the two teachers (the mother tongue and the foreign language), should combine their educational procedure in order to develop the students’ general cognitive growth, too. While working with two languages (the mother tongue and the foreign language), it is essential to discover the influence one has over the other. Generally speaking, of course, during the acquisition of the foreign language, the mother tongue interferes greatly in several ways (accent, the choice of word, the use of tenses, the structure of sentences, in both the oral and the written language). The problem in our experiment was to verify, when joining the two languages during the development of the reading skill associated to the writing of a précis, if the L2 influences the L1. Are these two L1 skills able to be transferred to the L2 skills or vice-versa? The answer was very difficult, and we had no predictions at the beginning of the experiment, except for “the overlapping of two languages”²⁴ or “the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language”²⁵ and the mother tongue. In fact, “the reciprocal dependence is less known and less appreciated,” writes Vygotsky. At first, we had some doubts about the transfer referring to the reading and the summary writing skills, but, later on, when we were really conscious of the effective capabilities of our students in both the mother tongue and the foreign language, our doubts reduced greatly. In fact, these two abilities are almost neglected in the first language; reading is scarcely practiced, because it requires time and concentration, summary writing is not at all considered an academic exercise. For these reasons, the mother tongue has not so much to transfer to the foreign language, not even in the methodology to be used: how to process a reading passage with the aim of writing a summary. The only advantage mother tongue students showed when reading a passage in their own language was that they retained its meaning more quickly, and did not copy sentences from the source passage so often, when writing their summary. However, their mother tongue summary showed lack of correct linguistic usage as well as the incapacity to construct a well organized paragraph.

It is clear that the L1 affects the L2 in many ways. Linguistic transfer occurs when learners start to learn another language. They begin to use linguistic

Cfr. Garrett P., Griffiths Y., James C. and Scholfield P., Use of the mother-tongue in second language classrooms: An experimental investigation of effects on the attitudes and writing performance of bilingual UK schoolchildren, in *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, Vol. 15, 1994, Issue 5; Yadav M. K., Role of Mother Tongue in Second Language Learning, *International Journal of Research (UR)*, Vol. 1, Issue11, December 2014: 572-582.

²³Vygotsky, 1987: 160.

²⁴Haugen E., *Bilingualism in the Americans: A bibliography and research guide*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 1956.

²⁵Odlin T., *Language transfer: Cross-linguistic influence in language learning*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

resources from their L1 (Leafstedt & Gerber, 2005). By cross-linguistic transfer, learners use L1 language to gain skills in the L2.²⁶

As a consequence of our presuppositions, during this research, students were trained in both languages. They were asked to read some passages not just for pleasure, rather with the precise aim to retain it, to focus on the main message, to emphasize the corollary themes, to recognize the writer's purpose, attitude, and mood as well as to present their own point of view. Then, from the linguistic side, they were asked to construct a cohesive as well as a purposeful essay. Even from this perspective, the influence of the L1 over the L2 was not clear, since students, in general, are not familiar with the writing skill. In sum, besides training students to write a good précis, we had another aim, that is to say, to analyze the degree of influence between the two languages. Our faded presupposition was that, may be, training students to a better knowledge of the foreign language could have a positive effect on the mother tongue. Our first assessment, studying a foreign language could improve the mother tongue, might find an answer. By following Altmisdort's investigation on the transit of L2 (English) reading skill on L1 (Turkish), we added also the influence of summary writing in L2 on L1.

The present study examines the relationship between English language learners' L2-L1 reading skills transfer and the effect of L2 reading courses on reading sub-skills in L1. Furthermore, it is questioned that whether there are any positive changes that might occur in L1 reading sub-skills. Answers to the following questions were examined: 1) Is there any effect of L2 on L1? 2) Do L2 reading skills influence L1 reading skills? 3) Do L2 learners develop their L1 reading skills by having L2 reading courses?²⁷

In developing the writing skill in L1, researchers also attest "that collaboration means that learners have joint responsibility over the production of the text. This may promote a sense of co-ownership and hence encourage students to contribute to the decision making on all aspects of writing: content, structure, and language."²⁸ Here, too, writing refers to the general development of the writing skill and not specifically to the writing of an individual précis.

The three groups of students (the control group – those students who did not follow any specific strategy during their foreign language learning process –, the triads and the one working individually) had to read and then summarize the same passages. Of course, when facing the task of summarizing literary passages, students were asked to know the plot of the novel first, then to discuss it, and at least to pick out the main message within a specific environment and historical context. This device has been used in order to help them organize their impressions in accordance with those of the author of the novel. Another important detail has to be considered, when our aim was to develop the linguistic average of both the mother tongue and the second language; that is, we have used, in the mother tongue and in the foreign

²⁶Altmisdort G., The Effects of L2 Reading Skills on L1 Reading Skills through Transfer, in *English Language Teaching*, Vol. 9 No.9, 2016: 28-35.

²⁷Idem: 30.

²⁸Storch N., Collaborative writing: product, process, and students' reflections, in *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 14, 2005:153-173;

language, the same passages to be read and then summarized. This device does not mean to facilitate the students during their reading comprehension task in the foreign language, for two important reasons;

- 1) firstly, because the mother-tongue passages were introduced after the foreign language passages, so that the students had a long time to forget about them, and
- 2) secondly, because the teachers' aim was to work from the linguistic as well as the mental organization of discourse. In other words, how to improve both the semantic and the grammatical-syntactical side of the language by considering the author's point of view. As more or less expected, since comprehension in their mother tongue had been easier, the summarized text resulted more personal from the linguistic side, while the summary in the foreign language relied on the source text more heavily.

The problem concerning scientific reading passages poses a different evaluation compared to literary texts. In fact, scientific notions do not depend so heavily on personal experience, rather they belong to specific areas more linked to technology; their process is different from the one related to build up cultural concepts. It seems that, especially when these information are introduced through a foreign language text, interferences with the mother tongue are reduced, because, most of the time, it is the students' first experience in that specific matter.²⁹

Other studies, investigating in both the mother tongue and the foreign language, attest that the first tongue reading and writing exercise results more easily because, "It showed that students reading English passages needed additional time than reading Persian passages. The reason is that some words or sentences were vague for some students and the process of the meaning of the passages takes more time."³⁰ At the very beginning of our experiment, during the pre-course tests, when students were asked to write a summary, the stimulus to copy from the source passages was very high in both languages – the mother tongue and the foreign language. This feature was our leading point. In brief, we wanted our students to use the reading skill as a condition to acquire as much vocabulary as possible, and, meantime, to analyze the language from the grammatical-syntactical perspective: how many ways people have to express the same information, according to environment, personal feelings and reactions, people involved in the situation, and even the time of the day and the weather affecting the subjects, etc. Summarizing, viewed from this side, is not a neutral reproduction of the original passage, rather it means to put ourselves into the author's opinion, to take his/her point of view and transmit his/her considerations with our words, even taking into account our impressions. Then, by using always 'novel sentences' as Noam Chomsky says, we focus on the many different structures language offers people during communication to convey the same meaning.

²⁹Cfr. Vygotsky, 1987: 162, where he compare everyday with scientific language.

³⁰Larijani L., Kasmani M.B., Sabouri N. B., Exploring the Effects of First Language Reading on Second Language Reading across Different proficiency Levels, in *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 3, March 2015: 646-651; cfr. Delaney Y.A., Investigating the reading-to-write construct, in *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 7, 2008: 140-150.

Lexical as well as grammatical-syntactical proficiency and text-retention strategies (memorization) are the central focus of the present study, since both these abilities (linguistic and memory) give students the chance to manipulate the language according to the context and to their considerations, too. In fact, we memorize what has impressed us, in brief, the events which connect our story to the one read. Anybody retains more easily what is familiar to his/her own experience. That is why, working on one's own is a better strategy during a summary writing exercise, because the student has the possibility to concentrate on his/her personal points of view. Once achieved these stages (linguistic mastery and retention), students enter into the wonderful world of real communication, since a written text uses a variety of semantic and structural nuances, while an oral performance adds paralinguistic and kinetic means. The way students construct a discourse gives evidence not only of the linguistic ability achieved, but of their own thoughts and beliefs, even when they write a summary from a passage written by another author.

Procedure: 3 Hours – Two Times a Week for 20 Weeks

This study lasted seven months and involved a pre-test in October and a post-test in May for the three groups (the control group – the students who did not follow any specific strategy –, the triads and the students working individually). A pre-course activity concerned the reading of a short passage including the answering of comprehension and vocabulary questions. Since our attempt involved also texts including language for specific purposes, a few lessons preceding the actual summary writing procedure was considered necessary in order to emphasize the role semantic and syntactical structures have in differentiating the typology of the passages. During the seven months only two intermediate tests were given, just to attest the students' improvement. However, the control group (students not following any specific procedure) attested that our strategy had improved the linguistic ability of the students belonging to the experiment. It also showed that the students working individually, matured much better compared with those working in triads. During the experiment, we used to have a kind of oral confrontation from time to time. The confrontation consisted in asking each student to choose a new passage from the various categories examined and to summarize it orally. We think that the better result concerning our individual learners in contraposition to the results achieved by other scholars (Kung 2002, Fraizer 2007, McDonough 2004), was due to the fact that reading and summary writing need a deep concentration as well as a deep personal involvement. In fact, summary writing is not only a mere transposition of a fact as described by different authors, rather it also concerns the reader's engagement in the story. Any passage contains a central idea enriched with a set of corollary nuances, which stress it according to the feeling of the author's. Then, the passage contains other information that might even distract the reader from the central idea, and, in my opinion, these pieces of information are the ones picked up according to the reader's experience. Considering the age of the students (around 18), their level in English (low-intermediate), we selected passages not so long and difficult (300-500 words), because our aim was essentially to promote, beside their language, their mental

organization, too. The suggested length for their summary was one-third the length of the original passage, so that, they were forced to concentrate their attention on the real message. In brief, I think that the main idea should be captured howsoever, while the adding information leaves a certain margin of freedom; this means that the reader keeps those details which resemble his/her personality and experience.

Method

Suggested steps to follow when writing a summary

- 1) Read the text as many times as possible being sure you understood it properly. If necessary look into the dictionary the exact meaning of unknown words.
- 2) Analyze the syntactical structures in order to understand why the author has chosen to use them when focusing on a specific matter (for example: the position of certain adverbs, the use of certain verb tenses rather than others, punctuation, etc.). Analyze also the choice of certain words, which might have a stronger meaning compared to more generic ones. A linguistic discourse analysis is an effective strategy to be applied in order to decide which category the text belongs to (languages for specific purposes).
- 3) Try to find the main idea and the message the writer wants to send.
- 4) Find also the corollary ideas which highlight the main idea.
- 5) Decide, in your own opinion, which of the corollary ideas are either nearer the main concept and describes it better, or weaken its role.
- 6) Now it is necessary to re-read the text.
- 7) Only at this point you can hazard skimming the text and remembering the main idea.
- 8) Underlay the subheadings, then re-write them in your own order.
- 9) Divide the text into paragraphs and number them following your opinion, so to focus on the main idea better.
- 10) Write down the key-support points for the main idea.
- 11) Write down in your own words the main idea and its key-support points.
- 12) Re-read the whole passage.
- 13) Look at your notes.
- 14) Summarize the passage orally.
- 15) Only now you are ready to write down your own summary.

This long procedure, which includes a deep textual analysis, is an important step to be followed, because it permits students to grasp:

- 1) the real meaning of the passage;
- 2) the message it wants to convey;
- 3) the writer's point of view, and then
- 4) to internalize it and consider it from the personal side, too. Furthermore, it gives the student the occasion: a) to learn new vocabulary, b) to consider the

writing style of the writer, and, in the end, c) to decide which linguistic category the passage belongs to. It helps also to internalize the whole meaning and to remember it while adding personal considerations.

In brief, summary writing is both a linguistic and a mental exercise, in which memory as well as personal experience play a decisive role. It is worth to stress that the reader's reaction to a text is strongly influenced by his/her personal background, which tends to view the text not only from the writer's but also from the reader's perspective. This is a risk that cannot be underestimated, a risk which controls our evaluation either when we read a book or when we watch a film or when we come across any kind of events. Our cultural data, which contributes during our growth to shape our behaviour, also influences our reading perception. A deep linguistic analysis of the text tries to avoid not only textual meaning misappropriation, but, above all, the incorporation of entire source structures and words, due to limits on both students' vocabulary and low comprehension. Verbatim or exact copying is a very common procedure during summary writing, since, from the psychological point of view, the student of foreign languages feels more at ease if he/she uses entire stretches of words exactly as they are in the source text. This feeling, as said above, is not so common when summary writing is an exercise concerning L1. L1 students tend to make substantial variations in both vocabulary and syntactical constituents. Our long procedure gives the teacher the opportunity to value in details the students' linguistic improvement, since their ability to construct novel sentences by using synonyms and antonyms, shows the gradual maturity they have acquired during their foreign language learning process (grammar and word-level).

Results

The texts completed by the three groups of students were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative measures. Quantitative measures included measures of fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Fluency was valued in terms of the total number of words. In order to check accuracy, two measures were used: the proportion of error-free clauses of all clauses (EFC/C) and the number of errors per word. Of course, evaluation in summary writing is very complex, since two points have the same importance: 1) the effective comprehension of the source passage, and 2) the way students use the language from both a grammatical and a semantic point of view. Paraphrasing seems to be the most difficult strategy to cancel, because students, by copying from the source text, think to avoid misinterpretation and grammatical mistakes. Quantitative measures included the evaluation of fluency (short and correct structures, correct use of lexicon, and number of words), while qualitative measures considered how deep was the comprehension of the source passage. But, we should consider that evaluation is possible only if we are sure that the meaning of the source text has been exactly grasped and memorized. In doing so, the mental as well as the linguistic level are combined, and they can work in progress.

The oral summary of simple and short narrative literary texts, introduced from time to time during the summary writing experiment, helped students greatly,

especially from the mental organization of the entire plot and the selection of secondary features. We decided not to have a final test in the form of an exam, because we think students have to feel at ease and should not go into the common stress attached to any form of exam. The last exercise was supposed to show us their grade of achievement, their satisfaction to have achieved a better knowledge in both the mother tongue and the foreign language. Moreover, they had to show, first of all to themselves, that they had acquired a correct strategy to control their memory when constructing a formal discourse, whose aim was to report other people's opinions. By developing either their linguistic level or their mental organization they have also enforced their personality and self-esteem. These two features are very important, especially during the learning of foreign languages. The evaluation of our students' progress served another purpose, more directly connected to the methodology employed during the experiment; it showed us that our project has achieved very good points, but it still needs improvements. We have to decide very carefully, and discuss in details the steps we will follow for our further procedures. It is not an easy task, because it requires a thorough evaluation of the many phases each student has to go through, as well as his/her attitude and motivation in carrying on this aim. Motivation, in fact, is the first element which guides any kind of learning. Motivation can derive directly from the learner, but it needs to be stimulated also by the entire context as well as by the conditions created by the classmates and especially by the teacher/*liminal servant*. So the teacher has a great responsibility in directing students' behaviour and mind towards the aim they both want to achieve.

Anyway, to be sure about this result another study should be carried out, that is to say the triads should not be moved time by time, as we did in our experiment. The data were collected during 20 weeks (October-May) in the two classes involved in the experiment (the mother tongue and the foreign language), so that it was easier to analyze the different problems arising during this process. The main problem, common to both classes, is the one which requires concentration on memory. This exercise helps organize paragraphs as well as highlight the main idea followed by a series of corollary messages which support it. Then, it is difficult to evaluate the corollary ideas, because this process requires to examine not only the writer's point of view but, moreover, the personal experience of the reader, and later join both of them. From the linguistic side, of course, the summary, written in the mother tongue, showed a better comprehension of the whole topic, while its written style showed a lack of writing practice, in the sense that reporting other people's ideas is always complicated, because students, as previously said, are not used to construct clear and well structured sentences in both oral and written language when they have to use a formal register. The final text of the control group (the students who did not follow any strategies) attested that the two groups (the triads and the students working individually) had improved both their mother tongue and the foreign language, because their summaries, even though were not perfect, showed a certain coherence and cohesion, and at least the students had mastered the linguistic as well as the mental strategies required to write a passage in a formal language.

Examples of passages used for reading and summary writing exercise

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN **Treasure Island** by Robert Louis Stevenson
The Stadley Press, London & Ewell, 1947: 148.literary analysis

This fifth trip was quite different from any of the others. In the first place, the little gallipot of a boat that we were in was gravely overloaded. Five grown men, and three of them – Trelawney, Redruth, and the captain – over six feet high, was already more than she was meant to carry. Add to that the powder, pork, and bread-bags. The gunwale was lipping astern. Several times we shipped a little water, and my breeches and the tails of my coat were all soaking wet before we had gone a hundred yards. The captain made us trim the boat, and we got her to lie a little more evenly. All the same, we were afraid to breathe. In the second place, the ebb was now making – a strong rippling current running westward through the basin, and then south'ard and seaward down the strait by which we had entered in the morning. Even the ripples were a danger to our overloaded craft; but the worst of it was that we were swept out of our true course and away from our proper landing-place behind the point. If we let the current have its way we should come ashore beside the gigs, where the pirates might appear at any moment. 'I cannot keep her head for the stockade, sir,' said I to the captain. I was steering, while he and Redruth, two fresh men, were at the oars. 'The tide keeps washing her down. Could you push a little stronger?' 'Not without swamping the boat,' said he. 'You must bear up, sir, if you please – bear up until you see you're gaining.'

Before asking students to summarize this passage we have to cover various steps:

- 1) To study the literary and the historical age of Stevenson.
- 2) To read at least a summary of the whole story.
- 3) To consider Stevenson's linguistic style, which includes direct and indirect speech, and his peculiar semantic use of words and metaphors. It might even be considered a special language.
- 4) To analyze the rich and detailed description of places, people and their feelings and the life around them.

Linguistic Analysis

Semantics:

Gallipot a metaphor describing a very small boat

Gunwale special language the top of the side of a boat

Lipping astern: dipping under a little in the stern - astern behind a ship

Shipped: to get into

Breeches: trousers below the knee

Tails – coat tails: the borders of a jacket

Trim: to cause a ship to assume a good position in the water by arrangement of cargo or passenger

Ebb: of the sea to move away from the coast and fall to a lower level

Ripple: a small wave; to move in small waves

Gig: a light, narrow boat

Head: bow
Stockade
Steering to steer to control the boat
Oars: remi

Orlando by Virginia Woolf, A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company, New York, London:97.

So long had he been secluded, writing and reading, that he had half forgotten the amenities of nature, which in June can be great. When he reached that high mound whence, on fine days half of England with a slice of Wales and Scotland thrown in can be seen he flung himself under his favourite oak tree and felt that if he need never speak to another man or woman so long as he lived; if his dogs did not develop the faculty of speech; if he never met a poet or a Princess again, he might make out what years remained to him in tolerable content.

Here he came then, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. He saw the beech trees turn golden and the young ferns unfurl; he saw the moon sickle and then circular; he saw – but probably the reader can imagine the passage which should follow and how every tree and plant in the neighbourhood is described first green, then golden; how moons rise and suns set; how spring follows winter and autumn summer; how night succeeds day and day night; how there is first a storm and then fine weather; how things remain much as they are for two or three hundred years or so, except for a little dust and a few cobwebs which one old woman can sweep up in half an hour; a conclusion which, one cannot help feeling, might have been reached more quickly by the simple statement that ‘Time passed’ and nothing whatever happened.

But Time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality has no such simple effect upon the mind of man. The mind of man, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second.

Even though the summary of a non literary passage requires the same steps above suggested, the choice of vocabulary is totally different as well as the style employed. In fact the description is more direct and concrete. The main idea of the passage generally reports the writer’s point of view and the reader has not a large choice to interpret it by adding personal impressions.

Agamenon R.E. Oliveira, 2016, *Essays on the History of Mechanical Engineering*, Eds. Genghi Giuseppe, Sorge: 1-2.

In mechanics, Lagrange studied specific problems, such as the three-body problem related to the motion of the earth, sun and moon. By means of his Analytical Mechanics, he transformed Newtonian mechanics (Newton 1952) into a branch of analysis. Lagrangian mechanics, which was a result of the application of variational calculus to mechanical principles. Through this work, rational mechanics was able to fulfil the long-desired Cartesian aim of becoming a branch of pure mathematics.

In relation to problem later called applied mechanics, Lagrange, in his works known as the *Mélanges de Turin*, studied the propagation of sound, making an important contribution to the theory of vibrating strings. He used a discrete mass model to represent string motion consisting of a masses joined by weightless strings. Then, he solved the system of $n + 1$ differential equations, when 'n' tends to infinity, to obtain the same functional solution proposed by Euler (1707-1783). Lagrange also studied the integration of differential equations and made various applications to topics such as fluid mechanics, for which he introduced the Lagrangian function.

Lagrange's *Analytical Mechanics* was published in 1788, crowning a series of works and other important contributions previously developed by d'Alembert (1717-1783) and Euler (1707-1783). This book presents a model of formalized theory with the same meaning that is now understood by modern physicists. The logical unity of this theory is based on the least action principle. However, the two dimensions of formalization and unification are the main characteristics of Lagrange's method.

'Perspectives on Politics' – *American Political Science Association*, vol. 5, number 1, March 2007: 32.

What is Assimilation

To assimilate means to become similar to. This definition leaves open the questions of who is being made similar to whom, with regard to what, and how. In the context of immigration, assimilation means the creation of greater homogeneity in society through the attenuation of ethnic differences. Change can be in more than one direction, of course, and many commentators on the American melting pot argue that its cultural content changes as new words become part of the common lexicon and new traditions penetrate popular culture. Huntington himself distinguishes between the melting pot and tomato soup metaphors for American society. In the former case, immigrants change American culture by diluting the oriental ingredients in the pot; in the latter, the tomato taste continues to dominate even as new spices are sprinkled in. His preferred model of assimilation entails adoption of the 'American' way of life – learning English; adhering to the Anglo-Protestant culture of religious commitment, individualism, and the work ethic; and identifying oneself psychologically as a patriotic American. Although he refers briefly to structural assimilation – the large-scale of native minorities and immigrants into the main economic and social institutions of the 'host' society through education, economic mobility and intermarriage – Huntington's focus is cultural and political assimilation. If assimilation means the erosion of ethnic differences, then by any definition it is a process that occurs overtime.