Research on second language (L2) creative writing has illuminated the usefulness of literary-genre writing in the language-learning classroom. Still, as in any energetic area of study, questions remain to be answered. For instance, does a scaffolded approach that initiates L2 creative writers toward the production of a literary product befit all writers? Does such an approach take for granted that each writer needs such initiation, and that a researcher’s coding of texts and interviews matches what the writers themselves might have meant? Finally, what are L2 writers thinking while writing, and how might those cognitive moves reflect and have a bearing on identity construction?

With a focus on identity, Zhao (2015) positions her approach in contrast to previous creative-writing/language-learning research positions, among those being what we might think of as literary-genre intervention or workshop positions like those of Chamcharatsri (2009, 2013a, 2013b), Collins (2014), Disney (2012), Garvin (2012), Hanauer (2010, 2012, 2015), and Iida (2012, 2014), to name a few. These positions held that the experience of writing creatively impacted (and therefore could intervene to affect) language learning or L2 identity construction. Whereas Hanauer (2010), for instance, outlined a scaffolded approach to initiate L2 writers into poetry writing in which poems represented works of art that could be embodied and experienced by others as well as data that could be coded and analyzed to communicate a writer’s understanding of herself at the moment of creative expression (Hanauer, 2010, 2015), Zhao sidesteps this kind of methodological stance. Questioning methods of analysis that rely on a researcher to explain what a writer is thinking while writing, Zhao aims at analyzing thoughts directly. Analysis of writers’ voices, she argues, might best be accomplished by going directly to the source. To that end, she employs a think-aloud protocol, in which writers are asked to talk aloud during short-story writing tasks.

More specifically, Zhao (2015) carries out scientific research into creative writing of 15 participants she describes as motivated, experienced L2 creative writers in order to make the case that L2 writers’ autobiographical identities mediate writer voice, which is reflected in writers’ thoughts and which has to be investigated by looking beyond the texts that these
writers produce. Placing thoughts among the study’s units of analysis and exploring them with a think-aloud protocol in tandem with other methods allow for discussions of how creative writing represents a process of self-identification, which contributes to self-esteem and, importantly for Zhao, positive motivation. What Zhao’s book contributes to the field of L2 creative writing, then, is a research angle that achieves the following: (a) positions L2 creative writers as experienced negotiators of identity who desire to express social positions through writing, and that (b) explores writers’ voices as idiosyncratically reflected in their cognitive processes while writing. In this way, Zhao builds upon and contributes to previous scholarship.

In terms of theoretical orientation, Zhao’s (2015) sociocultural approach draws on Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger’s (1991) situated learning theory and the concept of communities of practice. This helps with discussions of L2 writers’ mostly solitary but possibly more cooperative communities. In addition, Zhao draws on poststructuralist perspectives, including the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Bonny Norton, Aneta Pavlenko, and James Lantolf. Poststructuralist perspectives inform the viewpoint for Zhao that L2 creative writers may draw on creative, empowering self-articulation in the face of sometimes limiting social relations. Additionally, Zhao marshals sociocognitive perspectives, which allows for conceptualizations of writers’ voices as performances that embody autobiographical identities.

In contributing to previous scholarship, Zhao’s (2015) innovative methodology follows a case-study design involving 15 multilingual participants. Three research questions guided her study, leading inquiry into the following: (a) how 15 L2 creative writers’ retrospective accounts of their life histories negotiated autobiographical identities, (b) how cognitive writing processes during two different short-story writing tasks contributed to the construction of emerging identity through the concept of writer voices, and (c) how these two types of identities interrelated. Zhao appropriately shapes methods of data collection and analysis to answer these questions. First, to explore autobiographical identities, Zhao conducted one to two-hour semi-structured interviews to elicit information about writers’ sociocultural life histories. This data was analyzed (specifically following Norman Fairclough’s lead regarding analysis of I-, We-, and You-statements) and coded through a modified version of critical discourse analysis that analyzed textual (personal pronouns and modality) and discursive levels (legitimation strategies and classifications of equivalence and difference). Next, to explore writers’ voices, Zhao carried out think-aloud story writing sessions to record writers’ cognitive processes while writing short stories. This data was also analyzed through quantitative approaches, coded for the following themes: (a) planning what to write, (b) composing the story, (c) monitoring the value of the composition, and (d) revising what has been written. In addition, this data was qualitatively coded to see if think-aloud protocols referenced back to reported conceptions of autobiographical selves.

Zhao’s (2015) sociocognitive inquiry yielded findings that importantly contribute to the field of L2 creative writing. Quantitative analysis of writers’ I-statements suggested that autobiographical identities carried over to aspects of writers’ voices, with Zhao finding two trends: (a) writers who fashioned autobiographical identities more assertively, and (b)
writers who fashioned autobiographical identities more implicitly. In quantitative analysis of story-composing data, Zhao found L2 creative writers' cognitive processes on the autobiographical-story task and the story-continuation story task suggested that certain tasks may appeal to writers with certain dispositions toward creative writing. Regarding qualitative examination of interview and think-aloud data, Zhao zeroed in on five of the original fifteen participants. She found that particular self-positionings related to past experiences with literacy and creative writing, which emerged from interview data, later materialized in think-aloud data. The think-aloud data reflected writers' voices, constructed during the performance of personalities. This performance also reflected struggles writers had in choosing how to self-represent in the face of perceived available ideologies and discourses. Zhao concluded that past life histories shaped habits, which were observable through analysis of cognitive writing activities.

More than once, Zhao (2015) notes or implies the limitation of the think-aloud protocol. These limitations seem perhaps too readily underestimated. This seems especially so when considering that the think-aloud protocol figures importantly in Zhao's overall stance that her study justifiably rejects previous researchers' researcher-centered interpretations of literary-genre writing. In addition, inter-rater reliability of quantitative coding might have been explained in more detail, perhaps with a statistical indication. Other times, the study's application of Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of community of practice feels problematic. For instance, as Zhao avoids the classroom-workshop approach that initiates learners into the writing of a literary genre (Chamcharatsri, 2009; Hanauer, 2010), her theoretical framework seems too easily to dismiss a process involving newcomers and old-timers in relation to a particular skill set. Zhao makes a case for the expediency of this theory as part of the book's framework by considering L2 creative writers as part of a diffuse community, but this may give too little credence to ways in which creative writing of literary genres implies levels of mastery of conventions for particular aesthetic and emotional effect.

As studies into the reading and writing of literary genres for language acquisition continue to gain momentum, Zhao's (2015) book is a reminder of the variety of methods and perspectives available. Perhaps most accessible for teacher-scholars and researchers, this book is a must-read for anyone researching literary-genre writing for language acquisition. It also contains important findings for identity and cognitive-process L2 writing studies.

References


**Justin Nicholes** is ABD in the Composition and TESOL program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. His research explores the role writing plays in constructing disciplinary identities, enhancing disciplinary learning, and supporting retention efforts. He has taught English Composition and TESOL since 2002 in Mexico, Germany, China, and the USA.