

Evaluating the Role of Writing in the First and Second Year University Foreign Language Curriculum

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Abstract

Approaches to foreign language (FL) instruction have changed a great deal in the past fifty years, the most fundamental change being the shift from a focus solely on language form to a focus on communicative competence (CC). Although most FL instructors now appear to focus on CC in the teaching of speaking, they do not necessarily apply CC to writing in the same way. The study reported here attempts to describe the role currently played by writing in the first and second-year FL curriculum by detailing the methods used by 10 professors working at 7 different universities across the United States to teach FL writing in these courses. Results indicate that *writing-to-learn activities* make up a large majority of the writing methods used, but that *learning-to-write* activities that foster CC in writing have also been successfully integrated into the beginning FL curriculum.

Keywords: foreign language writing, curriculum, survey, methodology, pedagogy

1. Introduction

The way in which the instruction of foreign languages (FL) is approached in the United States has undergone a series of very significant and dramatic changes during the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first. Perhaps the most fundamental of these changes has been the shift in focus away from a systematic focus on language form (i.e. grammar) towards a focus on the use the language system in context (Cook, 2003). In other words, the main goal of modern FL teaching approaches has become to help students learn to use the target language (TL) system for real-world communication. This shift has manifested itself in a variety of ways, perhaps the most significant of which being the introduction of the concept of communicative competence (e.g. Hymes, 1972; Savignon, 1972, 1983; Widdowson, 1978; Canale & Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983). Where success in FL learning had previously been measured generally by the degree to which the learner was able to dominate the grammar and/or vocabulary of a particular language, the early 1970s saw the introduction of a new measure of success, namely the ability to use learned grammatical competence in a variety of communicative situations (Hymes, 1972). In response to theoretical changes of this type and to changes to national policies and standards spearheaded by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), many FL instructors at all levels of instruction have shifted their focus away from teaching only grammar towards a push more in line with the idea of communicative competence.

Unfortunately, this shift in focus towards communicative competence does not yet appear to have been applied to FL writing in the same way it has been to FL speaking. Mainstream second language (L2) writing research has determined that writing is not simply another form of speech, but is instead its own communicative process, one which requires a different set of skills and which allows the language user to accomplish linguistic tasks which are not possible with speech alone (Leki, 2002; Silva & Matsuda, 2002). Unfortunately, much of U.S. university FL instruction does not appear to apply the concept of communicative competence to writing, as they do to speaking (i.e. Scott, 1996; O'Donnell, 2007; Hubert & Bonzo, 2010). Although almost all FL courses include some sort of written component (*writing* in this instance defined simply as the act of putting words to paper), FL instructors currently employ a wide variety of techniques and practices which actually target very different things (e.g. O'Donnell, 2007; Hubert & Bonzo, 2010; Reichelt et al, 2012). While most FL instructors appear to agree that writing should play a role in the instruction they offer to students, there appears to be no consensus regarding the exact nature of that role. Reichelt (2001), in her meta-review of studies targeting U.S. FL writing, concluded that the field currently has a very serious theoretical problem: there is currently no consensus regarding the purpose of writing within the FL curriculum. O'Donnell (2007), in her survey of U.S. university language program directors regarding their policies and procedures governing FL

writing, pointed to this same lack of consensus. A number of respondents to O'Donnell's survey expressed their frustration at both the lack of consensus and of dialogue among their colleagues concerning the best way to teach FL writing. Reichelt et al (2012), in their summary of the most important key issues currently facing FL writing research, also point very clearly to this lack of consensus among FL instructors, this observation based on more recent data. Additionally, Hubert & Bonzo (2010), in their survey of 153 FL faculty members working at U.S. universities, found that, as a group, these instructors knew very little about mainstream L2 writing research, and that their instructional policies and practices regarding writing were very often not informed, or informed only peripherally, by L2 writing research.

The case study reported here seeks to help move the field towards consensus by adding additional data to current understandings of the role of writing in first and second year U.S. university FL instruction. This study details the procedures and materials used by 11 FL faculty members working at 7 universities all across the United States to teach FL writing. These instructors provided materials that they use to teach FL writing, and participated in a series of classroom observations which showcased their teaching of writing to their FL students. The goal of this study is to determine the role that writing plays in the first and second year university FL curriculum, and to show how both *writing-to-learn* and *learning-to-write* activities can be implemented in these classrooms.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 Communicative Competence

The communicative competence movement is widely regarded as beginning with Hymes (1972). A growing research movement at that time had expressed dissatisfaction with the purely linguistic, idealized nature of Chomsky's recently proposed distinction between competence and performance (Chomsky, 1965), labeling it too constrictive and unrealistic. Hymes (1972) pointed out that Chomsky's theory did not provide for the additional sociocultural factors that exist in true communicative speech acts. Hymes claims that "there is behavior, and, underlying it, there are several systems of rules reflected in the judgements (sic) and abilities of those whose messages the behavior manifests" (Hymes, 1972: 63). Based on this distinction, Hymes (1972) proposed four additional types of judgments that language users make as they work to form their utterances: (1) Whether, and to what degree, a proposed utterance is formally possible, (2) whether or not that utterance is feasible and possible for the language user, (3) whether the utterance is appropriate in the context at hand, and (4) whether or not the utterance is actually performed. In short, Hymes proposed that any complete theory of language use must take into account more than the individual learner's control over grammar of the language, and that successful language use must be measured by the appropriate use of grammar in context.

Canale and Swain (1980), followed by Canale (1983), further refined the notion of communicative competence, by breaking this concept down into four sub-competencies: (1) grammatical competence – control over the language system itself, (2) sociolinguistic competence – ability to appropriately produce TL utterances in different communicative situations, (3) strategic competence – the ability to use appropriate communicative strategies¹, and (4) discourse competence – the ability to combine grammatical forms and meaning to achieve a unified spoken utterance or written text. In sum, Canale and Swain added two important additional pieces to the puzzle: a consideration of how language users and learners deal with breakdowns in communication through the use of communicative achievement and reduction strategies, and an extension of the concept of competence from the level of a single sentence / utterance to that of the entire speech/writing act. Also, where previous theoreticians had not specified that communicative competence was to be applied to writing as well as speaking, Canale (1983) explicitly framed discourse competence in terms of both of the productive modalities.

Sandra Savignon is the researcher whose name is perhaps the most strongly associated with communicative competence within FL research and instruction in the United States, as her approach to this problem was framed with the second/foreign language learner in mind instead of the first language (L1) learner/user targeted by Chomsky, Hymes, and other earlier researchers. Savignon's (1983) article further refined our understanding of communicative competence, and her proposed definitions are still widely used by FL teachers and researchers to this day. Savignon defines learner communicative competence as the ability to engage in the 'expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning.' According to this definition, the core characteristics of communicative competence are associated with (1) the dynamic, interpersonal nature of the communicative act, (2) the application of competence not only to spoken utterance, but also to writing and other symbolic systems, (3) the role of context in determining a specific communicative competence, and (4) the relative, not absolute, nature of communicative competence and the measuring of competence by degrees instead of binaries.

3.2 L2 Writing – Teaching and Research

The field of L2 writing research has also experienced a series of very significant theoretical shifts over the past 50 years, many of which closely mirrored the changes happening in the larger fields of applied linguistics and second language

acquisition (SLA). First, up until the 1960s, writing had been regarded by most language users as much less important than speech, perhaps due in large part to the consensus view of the day that writing was merely an orthographic representation of speech, or ‘spoken language written down’ (Silva and Matsuda, 2002). Historically, the ability to communicate via spoken utterance has always been of utmost importance to the language user, with writing fulfilling very different and often much less prominent and/or immediate functions throughout much of history. For early language researchers and instructors, writing was viewed as an unimportant skill which merely served to reinforce the acquisition of grammatical and vocabulary knowledge (Leki, 2002), and little thought or effort was dedicated to improving student writing ability. However, during the past 50 years, L2 writing specialists, and to a lesser extent applied linguists in general, have come to regard writing in a very different light: as a separate, different communicative act requiring the establishment and practice of a different set of abilities. Writing is no longer thought of as ‘spoken language written down,’ but as a separate, distinct communicative process: one which requires a different set of skills and which allows the language user to accomplish linguistic tasks which are not possible with speech alone. Second, early language specialists approached writing as a decontextualized, isolated process: one in which the language learner engaged in speaking and/or grammar practice by putting spoken language down on paper in a manner devoid of the transfer of information to a particular audience. The act of writing has since come to be understood to be intricately connected to and embedded within a particular rhetorical situation. Because the relationship between the writer, the reader, the text, and reality are constantly changing, the task of the writer becomes extremely complex. The writer must negotiate not only through the construction of the text itself, but also through his/her own view of each written element, as well as the views held by potential readers (Matsuda, 1997).

Early L2 writing methods based on structural linguistics and behaviorism², the dominant theoretical paradigms of the day, expected instructors to employ a controlled program of systematic habit formation in an attempt to suppress all errors that were expected to occur. Under this method, called *Controlled Composition*, the text was seen as a collection of words and sentence patterns only and other concerns, such as purpose and audience, were largely ignored, and left very little room for creative expression. Several years afterwards, due to an increasing awareness of the fact that L2 writers need to produce longer texts made up of many sentences, the *Paragraph Pattern* approach was proposed. This method emphasized the importance of written organization above the sentence level. The basic concern of this tradition was the logical construction of discourse forms: focus was shifted from the sentence to paragraph development and to the essay as a whole. Elements such as topic sentences, introductions, comparisons and contrasts, and organizational modes were stressed. Necessary skills became the ability to produce these elements in a cohesive and coherent pattern throughout the length of the written work. However, the accuracy of the final product remained the primary goal of instruction.

The 1960s saw the introduction of the *Process Theory* of writing, developed in response to dissatisfaction with the *Controlled Composition* and *Paragraph Pattern* approaches. This method has become the strongest guiding force in the field of L2 writing over the last part of the 20th century (Atkinson, 2003). First and foremost, Process Theory led L2 writing instructors away from a sole focus on an accurate end product to a focus on the process of creating a text. Zamel (1982) proposed what many today still consider a fundamentally important defining aspect of *Process Theory* approaches to L2 writing: the fact that, since writers do not seem to know beforehand what they will say, writing is a process through which meaning is created. These ongoing discoveries being made by the writer have become one of the most important features of the L2 writing process, as student writing becomes a record of not only their level of TL proficiency at any given time, but also of their developing ideas. Zamel (1982) is also highly critical of approaches to teaching writing that involve only a focus on grammatical accuracy: “Thus, when writing is experienced as the mechanical act of transcribing one’s ideas, [...] when attention to form becomes the “dominant and absorbing activity” (Emig, 1978: 62), the act of writing as discovery cannot be explored.” She goes on to cite Halsted (1975) who claimed that “The obsession with the final product [...] is what ultimately leads to serious writing block. More importantly, it is a sure way to close off avenues to discovering what it is you have to say” (p. 88). In short, current L2 writing research tells us that the successful writer needs much more than knowledge of TL form; he/she also needs (1) content knowledge – knowledge of and information concerning the concept(s) to be addressed in the text, (2) process knowledge – knowledge of how to prepare and carry out a writing task, (3) genre knowledge – knowledge of the communicative purposes of a targeted genre and that genre’s value in different communicative contexts, and (4) context knowledge – knowledge of a perceived audience’s expectations and cultural preferences (Hyland, 2003).

3.3 FL Writing in the United States

Research into the status of FL writing in the United States appears to have begun in earnest with Reichelt (1999) and (2001). These two seminal articles helped to draw the attention of L2 writing experts to the fact that a complete theory of L2 writing must take into account more than just writing in an L2, but writing in a FL as well: “a theory of L2 writing that does not seriously consider FL writing is doomed to be skewed and incomplete” (Reichelt, 1999. P 182).

Reichelt (1999) reviewed 233 published works targeting FL writing in the United States. One of Reichelt's primary findings that are directly applicable to the present study is the fact that there is often no clear purpose or audience for writing outside the FL classroom. Where students studying English as an L2 often have a very clear need to produce good quality writing for (nearly) immediate use outside the classroom, U.S. FL students very often do not share this need. Reichelt (2001), in her review of 32 studies targeting pedagogical practices in U.S. FL writing instruction, highlights this same point again, pointing to the observed lack of a unified sense of the purpose of FL writing among teachers and researchers as a "particularly significant problem within the body of FL writing research" (p. 578). O'Donnell (2007) conducted a survey in which 66 U.S. university FL language program directors were asked to describe the way in which they approach FL writing in their curricula. O'Donnell found a wide variety of approaches, goals, and techniques used to teach writing, as well as frustration among survey respondents concerning the lack of both consensus and dialogue concerning FL writing practices. These findings appear to support Reichelt's (1999, 2001) previous assertions regarding the lack of consensus regarding the purpose of writing within the FL curriculum. Hubert and Bonzo (2010) conducted a survey in which 153 U.S. university FL instructors were asked to describe their level of knowledge of six of the most important L2 writing theories, along with a self-assessment of the extent to which those theories informed their teaching of FL writing. Hubert and Bonzo (2010) found that, as a group, the surveyed FL instructors possessed fairly low levels of knowledge concerning the targeted L2 writing theories, and that these theories did little to inform FL instructor teaching in most cases.

Reichelt et al (2012) offers a comprehensive review of key issues in the field of foreign language writing. Of interest to the present investigation are two of their key findings: (1) lack of consensus among FL instructors regarding the purpose of writing in the FL curriculum, and the wide variety of methods and techniques involving writing used by different FL instructors. Lefkowitz (2009) carried out an ethnographic study involving 20 U.S. FL instructors, and this data was reported in Reichelt et al (2012). Lefkowitz (2009: 36) found what she terms a "split between those [FL instructors] who used the first 2 years of instruction for less traditional, informal activities, and those who reserved that time for more traditional, formal practices." Lefkowitz uses the term 'less formal' to refer to activities whose goals are communicative in nature, including learner writing of emails, instructions, journals, translations, and other text types and topics designed to develop learner proficiency in a variety of real-world communicative situations. The term 'more formal' is used to denote those exercises whose goals involve the introduction and/or reinforcement of grammatical elements and/or classical rhetorical modes. Lefkowitz (2009: 36) also states that "these instructors' major objective for beginning and intermediate levels tended to be the eradication of error." Reichelt et al (2012) also conclude that the preponderance of "writing" activities currently being employed in the FL classroom are actually *writing-to-learn* activities (Lefkowitz & Hedgcock, 2009; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 2011), as opposed to *learning-to-write* activities (Hyland, 2003; Williams, 2005). *Writing-to-learn* activities treat the act of putting words down on paper as a way to introduce and/or reinforce other aspects of language, offering students and teachers a concrete way for students develop skills in grammar and speaking, generally with the end goal of developing learner speaking proficiency (Omaggio-Hadley, 2001; Lee and Vanpatten, 2003; Shrum and Glisan, 2010). Lefkowitz's (2009: 28) interviewees described writing instruction that "typically included selecting artificial topics, assigning them before any writing instruction occurred, and designing them, above all, to elicit grammar points." Few of the interviewed FL instructors taught in such a way as to help their students actually become better FL writers, instead creating assignments that "consistently emphasized grammatical correctness at the expense of communicative content" (Reichelt et al, 2012: 28). *Writing-to-learn* approaches appear to continue to be very prevalent within FL instruction (Scott, 1996; Lee & VanPatten, 2003; O'Donnell, 2007; Reichelt et al, 2012). In contrast, the goal of *learning-to-write* activities is the teaching of the act of communicative writing itself, and tends to include process-oriented activities largely absent from *writing-to-learn* approaches, such as brainstorming, group planning and discussion, along with a deliberate focus on addressing purpose and audience in student writing.

Reichelt et al (2012) also summarize 7 different uses for writing in the FL classroom, ranging from the very form-focused (using writing to reinforce FL spelling, grammar, and vocabulary, using writing to teach/test content related to culture or literature) to strongly communicative (using writing to prepare students to write in real-world situations, such as notes to landlords and shopping lists, using writing to prepare students to write for specific future careers). In sum, Reichelt et al (2012) found that writing is used in a very large number of ways for a wide variety of reasons.

3. Research Questions

The following research questions guide the present study:

1. What role does writing play in the first and second year FL curriculum?
 - a. What types of writing assignments do instructors use in these courses?

- b. How much time do FL instructors devote to writing in these courses?
 - c. How do FL instructors assess writing in these courses?
2. What does successful implementation of *learning-to-write* activities in the beginning FL classroom look like?

4. Methodology

4.1 Participating FL Instructors

10 FL faculty members participated in this study. All participating instructors were employed at the time at one of 7 universities located in different parts of the United States. One of the participants held only a Master's degree, with the remaining 10 holding a PhD in their fields of study. The types of degrees held by these participants are summarized in Table 1. Each participating faculty member was responsible for either personally teaching a first or second year FL course, or for serving as the coordinator of at least one multi-section first or second year course taught by affiliated faculty including instructors and/or graduate student teaching assistants. Each participating faculty member was either solely or in large part responsible for the content, scope and sequence of the first and/or second year FL curricula at each university.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Language	Degree	Field of Study	University Rank	Program Coordinator
Spanish	Ph.D.	AL	Associate Professor	Yes
Spanish	Ph.D.	AL	Senior Lecturer	Yes
Spanish / German	Ph.D.	AL/ GL	Associate Professor	No
Spanish	Ph.D.	AL/ GL	Associate Professor	Yes
French	Ph.D.	AL/ TE	Assistant Professor	Yes
French	Ph.D.	GL	Associate Professor	Yes
Spanish	Ph.D.	GL	Assistant Professor	Yes
French	Ph.D.	L	Associate Professor	No
Spanish	Ph.D.	L	Associate Professor	No
Spanish	M.A.	L	Senior Lecturer	Yes

*AL – Applied Linguistics, GL – General Linguistics, L – Literature, TE – Teacher Education

The universities included in this study were selected based on three criteria: (1) size, (2) location, and (3) reputation. In order to collect data from a representative sample of FL instructors working at a variety of institution types, both large and small schools were chosen for analysis. Three universities were selected from the western U.S.: one large public university, one small public university, and one small private university. One large public university was selected from the U.S. eastern seaboard, and two from the U.S. Midwest: one large public university and one mid-sized public university. The final university was a small private school located in the U.S. southwest. At the larger schools, the multi-section first and second year language courses investigated in this study were taught by affiliated faculty, including instructors and graduate teaching assistants coordinated by the faculty member participant in this study. At the smaller schools, these courses were taught directly by participating faculty members.

4.2 Data Collection

Participating FL faculty were asked to provide samples of instructional materials that showcased their knowledge of the teaching of L2 writing, and to allow the researcher to conduct follow-up observations of the classes in which these materials were used. Due to logistical concerns involving travel times to conduct classroom observations, instructor availability, and curricular requirements, not all classrooms observed were able to conduct a writing activity during the time researchers were present. Therefore, classroom observations involving the provided teaching materials are presented when possible, but not in every case. Electronic copies of participant instructional materials were collected via email, and classroom observations were conducted both with participating faculty themselves (in the cases of the smaller schools) and with the affiliated faculty under the direct supervision of participating faculty in the case of the larger schools. All observations were sound recorded with a high quality digital voice recorder, and careful notes were taken regarding each element of instruction carried out during each observed class period.

4.3 Data Analysis

Teaching materials provided by participants and classroom observation recordings/notes were analyzed to determine the role that writing played in the curriculum of each course. This was first accomplished by examining course syllabi and writing assignment materials to determine (1) the overall global classroom goals and outcomes of each course, (2) the weight that writing was given towards the final grade in each course, (3) the types of writing assignments required in each course, and (4) the amount of time spent on different writing assignments in each course. Second, course materials and classroom observation recordings/notes were examined to determine the way in which each participating FL faculty member approached writing in his/her course(s), including (1) the goals/outcomes of each writing assignment, (2) instructions and/or writing prompts guiding each assignment, and (3) the way(s) in which writing assignments were graded and otherwise assessed.

5. Results

A total of 27 different courses were observed during the course of this study at 7 different universities across the United States. The observed class periods ranged from 50 to 75 minutes in duration, and from first through fourth semester of study. Of these 27 courses, 15 were first-year FL courses and 12 were second-year courses.

5.1 Observed Courses – Global Goals/Outcomes

An examination of syllabi from each of the observed courses revealed sets of goals and outcomes that were firmly centered on spoken communication. Some of these focused on learner development of ‘basic survival skills’ in the TL, others on the accomplishment of ‘real-world objectives’ using the TL, and others explicitly addressing the ACTFL Standards for Foreign Language Learning (i.e. the ‘5 Cs of Foreign Language Education’). Each course also indicated that the culture of the TL was to be explicitly targeted as well. Three course syllabi also explicitly stated the goal of helping students to become communicative writers. Examples goals and outcomes include leading students to ‘comprehend and produce [the TL], in oral and written form, so as to carry out a range of real-world functions,’ to ‘demonstrate comprehension of [the TL] spoken at normal speed on a variety of selected topics in various formats, to ‘use conversational skills in a variety of communicative situations,’ to ‘demonstrate accurate reading comprehension of cultural and literary material,’ to ‘produce written [TL] to meet practical needs as well as creative expression,’ to ‘progress toward competence in speaking, listening, reading and writing [and] knowledge of [TL] culture,’ to ‘interact meaningfully with classmates and develop communicative strategies, to ‘[develop] an appreciation for cultural differences,’ speak [the TL] well enough to describe, narrate, and ask and answer questions in present and past tense about everyday topics,’ ‘comprehend [the TL] with sufficient ability to grasp the main idea and some supporting details in short conversations that relate to daily life,’ to ‘read and understand the main idea and some details of [TL texts],’ to ‘write sentences and paragraphs on familiar topics related to daily routine and other themes of the text[book],’ and to ‘recognize the existence of cross-cultural differences and have an increased understanding and appreciation of the many perspectives and peoples of the [TL]-speaking world.’ In short, the observed courses appeared to be very strongly on the same page in terms of their overall goals and outcomes with regards to the development of spoken communicative proficiency, and much less so with regard to the development of writing proficiency.

5.2 Observed Courses – Types & Value of Written Assignments

Course syllabi provided by participating FL instructors revealed two basic kinds of writing activities: (1) *writing-to-learn* type “sentences and short paragraphs” stated in the syllabus as being carried out as an integral part of the design of the course, and (2) formal compositions of varying lengths and goals. Although the first type of writing activity was mentioned in most of the collected syllabi in the context of using these activities as learning tools, none represented a discrete formal assignment counting towards a separate percentage of the final course grade. The only type of writing activity in the provided syllabi to be given a formal percentage of the course grade was the formal composition (or very similar type assignment). A variety of other *writing-to-learn* type activities were found to be present in the observed courses, but no other activity rose to this level of formal recognition within these first and second-year FL courses. Three of the ten participating FL faculty represented here required no formal writing component of any kind in their first and/or second-year syllabi, with the other seven requiring between 1-6 formal compositions worth between 4% and 20% of the overall course grade. Those courses that did require a formal written component spent between 1 and 6 class periods per semester focusing on these activities, with at least half of this time in all but one case being devoted to allowing students to write their composition in class to avoid cheating. Data from this section are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Formal Writing Assignments

University	Formal Compositions	Formal Composition Grade Weight	Formal Compositions Multi-Draft	Total Class Days Spent in Support of Formal Compositions	Class Days Spent on In-Class Formal Writing
Small Public	2	20%	Yes	2	0
Large Public FL 1	2-3	10%-15%	Yes	2-3	2-3
Large Public FL 2	3	10%	Yes	6	3
Small Private	3	15%	Yes	3	3
Large Public FL 1	6	10%-20%	No	6	6
Small Private	2	10%	No	2	2
Large Public	1-2	4%-10%	No	1-2	1-2
Large Public FL 2	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Large Public	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Small Private	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

The two FL instructors who required between 1 and 2 single-draft writing assignments in their curricula each devoted a single class period to the in-class writing of those compositions, which were then turned in for formal instructor feedback. No additional class time was spent in support of formal writing in these two universities' courses. Each of these single-draft compositions was designed to allow students to use the grammar and vocabulary they had been recently presented with in class in a formal written way. These writing prompts explicitly mentioned the grammar that was required for successful assignment completion, while assigning students a (quasi) communicative topic to complete using that vocabulary and grammar. These compositions were then graded following a rubric that included separate grades for communicative content, organization, linguistic accuracy, and mechanics, with the instructor providing graded feedback to students based on their single drafts. Four participating FL instructors assigned multi-draft compositions in which students' first drafts were in some way improved after receiving feedback from the instructor and/or their peers. Two FL instructors required students to complete their first draft during a complete class period, with no additional in-class time being specifically devoted to these formal writing assignments. Only one instructor course spent a total of two days in support of two formal multi-draft compositions, with students completing their drafts outside of class time. The final instructor dedicated a total of two class periods per multi-draft composition, with one of the two days devoted to the in-class writing of the first draft.

Table 2. Observed Courses Types and Value of Written Assignments

5.3 Observed Courses – Writing Teaching Methods

A rather limited variety of teaching methods involving writing were observed in the supplied teaching materials and during classroom observations. First, all observed courses, without exception, made use of a series of *writing-to-learn* activities, the overwhelming majority of which taking the form of explicit grammar practice. These included sentence-writing drills targeting specific points of grammar with little/no emphasis on communication, the writing of words, phrases and sentences on the black/whiteboard by students in anticipation of teacher and/or peer feedback, and other similar, related activities. Also, *writing-to-learn* activities were commonly observed being used in direct support of classroom communication. For example, several of the observed courses used the writing of sentences and/or short paragraphs as a stepping stone in the communicative process, allowing students to organize their thoughts, conduct research and otherwise prepare for speaking with peers, including the preparation of appropriate grammar and vocabulary. This type of method involved the incorporation of speaking and written components into the same activity. First by beginning a communicative classroom activity with a short warm-up peer speaking exercise targeting a specific communicative topic, then asking students to then write several sentences to practice in writing what they had just been practicing via speaking, and then to read those sentences to their peer partner and/or to the instructor and to receive feedback on both message and feedback. Another similar method involved the starting out of a communicative activity with a written component, such as first having students write out a dialogue concerning a targeted communicative topic, and then having them use that written dialogue as a springboard to engage in speaking practice in a follow-up group speaking exercise. Additional data on the observed writing methods are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Writing Teaching Methods

University	WTL-G activities stated in syllabus	WTL-G activities observed in class / on materials	WTL-C activities stated in syllabus	WTL-C activities observed in class / on materials	LTW activities stated in syllabus	LTW activities observed in class / on materials
Small Public	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Large Public						
FL 1	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Large Public						
FL 2	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
Large Public	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Small Private	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
Small Private	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Large Public						
FL 1	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Large Public						
FL 2	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
Large Public	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No

WTL-G – Grammar-focused *Writing-to-learn* activities

WTL-C – Communicative *Writing-to-learn* activities

LTW – Learning-to-Write Activities

Most of the observed formal compositions also fell firmly within the definition of *writing-to-learn* activities. One excellent example of this type of activity was an in-class composition conducted in three steps: (1) pre-writing activities using 20% of class time, (2) in-class composing using 60% of class time, and (3) follow-up writing activities using another 20% of class time. Pre-writing activities were used to activate learner background knowledge regarding the topic at hand, and to allow students to prepare lists of vocabulary words and/or grammatical forms they would need to complete the upcoming composition. During the main composition phase, learners were given instructions to complete a specified number of words within the allotted time, to address a specific communicative topic, and to employ a targeted element of TL grammar in their composition. During the follow-up phase, students were instructed to review their composition for errors in their production of the targeted grammar. No additional instructions were given that would focus students' attention on other aspects of the writing process. All but two participating instructors followed a model similar in scope and sequence to this, with a great deal of variation on this same theme.

In contrast, those two FL instructors whose writing instruction included both *writing-to-learn* activities and activities adhering to at least some of the guidelines of *learning-to-write* activities additional information on writing to their students that was absent in all the other observed classrooms. One of these instructors integrated the topics that students would write about on their formal composition assignments into communicative classroom activities, but did so in such a way as to maintain the focus of the assignment on the skills involved in learning to write, instead of on either spoken communication or grammatical accuracy. First, class time was used to introduce the writing topic in a communicative way that activated learner background knowledge, while requiring both research and critical and/or creative thinking on the part of students. For example, one of these initial composition activities introduced students to the topic of divorce by having them answer a series of questions regarding their opinions on love, marriage, and finally divorce itself. Examples, originally presented to students in the TL and here translated, include "At what age should young people go on a first date?", and "what are good reasons to get married?", and "why do so many people get divorced?" After a class discussion of these questions, the writing prompt that would guide the composition was then given to students. This prompt asked students to write a reaction to a legal proposal aimed at reducing divorce rates by setting minimum age limits before marriage was allowed: '...a law prohibiting marriage until the woman is 21 years old and the man is 24 years old.' This writing prompt then carefully directed students to consider this point, and to respond with their opinion as to the effectiveness of this type of law, all without requiring, or specifically mentioning, any particular point of grammar. Students were further guided by additional questions designed to require brainstorming and planning in preparation for later writing at home. These questions not only helped students to craft their textual argument, but also to consider the best way to get through to the audience to whom they were writing. After students were walked through the initial steps of the process of writing, they were required to complete their essays out of class. Lastly, students turned in their writing for revision by the instructor, who provided feedback on the effectiveness of students' writing,

and allowed students to improve their grade by completing a revision of their initial draft based on the feedback provided by the instructor.

The second instructor to employ learning-to-write activities in the classroom did so in a more elaborate and delineated manner than this first example. First, students were provided with elaborate rubrics that set forth the requirements for successful completion of the formal writing assignment. These rubrics included the need for grammatical and lexical accuracy, but also the need for clear textual organization and cohesion, as well as careful attention to style in order to meet the needs of the intended audience. For example, students were required to present a 'clear development of ideas, with good transitions between them,' to 'pay attention to [their] audience. To whom [they] were writing,' to avoid 'too many simple sentences, or too complex sentences,' and 'Pay attention to the connotation of the words.' Students were given time to prepare for their writing assignment out of class, after which the first draft of these compositions were written during class time. Afterwards, students engaged in an in-class peer review of each other's writing, and were provided additional rubrics to guide them in this process. Students were asked to gauge each other's general comprehensibility, textual coherence and sophistication, along with the overall effectiveness of the composition, all this given with specific instructions to focus only on content. The instructor then provided additional feedback in the form of coded corrections targeting all of the above mentioned facts of the writing process, and students produced a final version of their composition based on both of these types of feedback.

6. Discussion

6.1 Research Question 1

The data generated here appear to strongly support previous research findings that have described the use of writing in the U.S. FL curriculum as merely a tool to teach other language skills and/or have claimed that FL students are not actually being taught to be better writers. First, an analysis of provided course syllabi showed very clearly that the primary goal of each of these courses was directly related to the development of spoken communicative competence among students. Second, *writing-to-learn* activities were a ubiquitous feature of all observed courses, with additional *learning-to-write* activities observed in only two cases. Three of the ten observed FL faculty instructors required no formal writing of any kind in their first and/or second year writing courses. Five of the ten did not employ any kind of activity that could meet the requirements to be classified as a *learning-to-write* activity. They instead assigned a variety of *writing-to-learn* assignments carried out, assessed, and valued within a rather narrow methodological spectrum. Only two of the observed universities employed activities that specifically sought to make their students better writers, in addition to their use of more traditional *writing-to-learn* activities. Additionally, formal writing in all cases but one was limited to a very small amount of class time, and generally consisted of giving students the class time they would need to complete the formal writing assignment in a controlled environment. The majority of observed formal writing assignments were largely grammar-focused, with several trying very hard to integrate additional communicative requirements into these activities, and were generally assessed primarily for grammatical accuracy and secondarily for communicative content. In short, the answer to our first research question would appear to be that writing continues to play a firmly supporting role in the majority of first and second year FL curricula, and that *writing-to-learn* activities are by far the most common use for writing in these types of courses. However, it is also important to point out that two notable exceptions to this trend were also observed, and that these practices, carried out with first and second-year FL learners, appeared to be consistent with a *learning-to-write* pedagogy.

6.2 Research Question 2

Two of the ten observed instructors employed activities that were consistent with the guidelines of *learning-to-write* activities, and these activities clearly demonstrate how these activities can be successfully integrated in beginning FL instruction. First, both instructors helped to minimize student's overt focus on grammar by minimizing the formal role of grammar in the exercise. One instructor explicitly instructed students 'not to worry' about grammar during the initial phases of the writing assignment, and the other simply did not mention it at all, while both simultaneously directing students to focus on content, textual effectiveness, and consideration of audience. This approach is consistent with Zamel's (1982) call to avoid allowing student attention to form to become the dominant activity of the exercise, as well as her challenge to provide students with opportunities to engage in a writing process in which meaning is created and which discoveries are accomplished. Second, both instructors provided additional information and requirements to guide students through the process of producing effective communicative writing that went far beyond a simple focus on form. Both instructors included specific instructions on consideration of audience (one much more explicitly than the other), textual cohesion and overall effectiveness. Additionally, both addressed students' grammatical accuracy, but only after the initial stages of the writing assignment were complete, allowing students to focus their initial efforts on creating effective communicative writing instead of simply practicing grammar.

7. Conclusions

Since the beginning of the communicative competence movement in FL instruction, multiple researchers (e.g. Savignon, 1983; Scott, 1996; O'Donnell, 2007; Reichelt et al, 2012) have repeatedly pointed out that writing does not receive the same treatment as speaking when it comes to preparing students to use the TL outside the classroom, particularly in beginning instruction. Given the fact that the ability to produce quality written communication has become increasingly important in the 21st Century (Leki, 2002), we believe it imperative that FL students are taught to produce quality communicative writing from the very beginning. This is especially important given the current situation surrounding FL instruction in U.S. universities. First, attrition rates tend to be very high among first and second-year FL students (Lobo & Poyatos, 2010; Lobo, 2012), with a large percentage of these learners ceasing their study of the FL after a rather limited amount of time. The fact that first and second-year university courses are not teaching these students to write in the TL greatly reduces the possibility that these learners will ever be taught the writing conventions of the FL. If these students do end up needing to write in their FL skills in their future careers, they will have missed out on a great deal of important information regarding the creation of effective TL texts. Second, for those students that do continue on to upper-level FL courses that require more advanced proficiency in reading and writing in the FL, these upper-level courses must often act as remedial FL literacy courses, instructors being forced to teach students to write before they can move on to the content being delivered in these courses. Due to the fact that actual communicative writing is so often not addressed at the lower levels of instruction, this forces upper-division FL courses into the less-than-optimal role of bringing students up to speed on their writing abilities instead of teaching the literary, linguistic, and/or cultural content that these courses are designed to impart. Beginning FL students tend to receive instruction that is focused almost exclusively on grammatical accuracy, as was observed in the present data, and are not taught to deal with those additional aspects that are so crucial to the development of good writing skills, such as the anticipation of the needs of one's audience, the successful development of a written argument, and maintaining textual cohesion. Given these facts, we consider it prudent to call upon FL instructors to seriously consider adding *learning-to-write* to their first and second-year curricula. This is not to say that *writing-to-learn* activities have no place in FL writing, nor that they should be entirely abandoned. We believe there an ongoing, crucial supporting role that writing can and should play in FL learning, and that *writing-to-learn* activities will continue to be a fundamental part of the learning process, not only in the type of FL courses targeted here, but in many different types of instruction. However, we also believe that *writing-to-learn* activities are also of vital importance to FL instruction, as these can offer students a very different type of instruction that will lead them to actually produce better writing. With the current push in FL instruction towards communicative competence, it makes little sense that the field of U.S. university FL instructors continue to approach writing in such a way as to not directly work to build learner communicative ability in writing.

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Notes

1. Communicative strategies are “verbal and nonverbal strategies that [...] compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or to insufficient competence” (Canale & Swain, 1980, p. 30). See Dornyei & Scott (1997) for an excellent meta-review of communicative strategy research.
2. Behaviorist theories held that language acquisition consisted of the memorization of dialogues and the establishment of good habits via repetition and reinforcement (See Lee & VanPatten (2003) and Cook (2003) for reviews of the major differences between behaviorist-informed approaches and more recent communicative approaches).



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