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ABSTRACT

This discussion of strategies for improving writing evaluation in a course in English as a Second Language begins with a brief review of relevant research and then offers concrete suggestions for improvement in testing. The suggestions are in the form of five general considerations rather than specific test-writing techniques. They include the following: (1) provide plenty of opportunity for students at all levels to practice the type of writing expected on the test; (2) make the assessment reflect the goal of the course, with mechanical and grammatical errors kept in the perspective of the overall communicative purpose of the text; (3) test a variety of skills and create writing tasks of varying lengths; (4) plan tests to be shorter and more frequent; and (5) create evaluation checklists or profiles to systematize grading, reduce bias, and communicate results to students. Ways in which curriculum and classroom activities can be adjusted to reflect these considerations and better prepare students for evaluation are offered. A 15-item bibliography is included. Sample grading criteria for compositions and sample criteria for use in a composition course (presented in Spanish) are appended. (MSE)

ASSESSMENT OF FL LEARNERS' WRITING ABILITY: Formulation of Tasks and Evaluation

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Writing. The "other" productive language ability. The step-child of the foreign language curriculum. Like the old bachelor uncle or maiden aunt in the family, its position in the curriculum is secure but its role is not often well defined. In grammar-translation methodology, the role of writing was to produce accurate translations. In the audio-lingual framework, writing was the last of the four language skills to be addressed and was judged for its reproduction of the model response. In communicative langauge teaching methods we look at expressing ideas. It is in that framework that this paper shall address assessing writing ability and the issues involved in its measurement.

Rather than waiting for the backwash from the changes in testing writing at a national level and also from testing ESL writing, it is incumbent upon the second language acquisition researcher to identify where testing of foreign language writing currently stands, to identify those broad issues in testing that are relevant to testing foreign language writing and to carefully reexamine the entire testing process from conceptualization of writing goals to the development of the testing instrument. Testing is receiving renewed national attention. The scope of the issue of testing is not limited to just the classroom. There are highly-charged ideological, methodological, political and

technical problems to contend with in taking a new, critical look at national school testing (Merl, 1991). While the focus of this paper is not on national school testing, I mention this to underscore the immediacy of the issue of testing writing in a foreign language curriculum.

Omaggio (1986) indicated that many classroom achievement tests still reflect the thinking and philosophies of the sixties and now out-moded behaviorist psychology in that many tests are still discrete point. Instead of reflecting philosophies of testing, tests should reflect course goals. Valette (1978) observed that the tests and grading methods used in the classroom are the ultimate guide for identifying instructional objectives (or lack thereof). Our tests are the true measure of what is important to us; they may reveal the short-sightedness of our goals and the limitations of our imagination in measuring them.

Hairston (1986) indicates that there has been a shift towards focussing on the process of writing rather than the written product. She indicates that the term "the process of writing" does not refer to a singular process; instead, "process" refers to a constellation of processes and techniques. Flower & Hayes (1981) state that writing involves a process of making plans and carrying them out; it can be analyzed and mapped. Hughey *et al.* (1983) encourage a great deal of list

making and map making throughout the process of writing.

Hughey *et al.* (1983) first state that the teacher's role is to understand the "additional complexities involved in *learning the writing process...*" (p. 47, emphasis added). They then go on to identify three ways the teacher can create a "context for learning" and consequently, a framework for testing: 1) select interesting and stimulating material for testing; 2) do not assign use of a rhetorical structure but rather let that structure emerge as the student becomes aware of the options through the organizational process; 3) be prepared to deal with syntactic structures that the rhetorical structure will generate (p. 47). Hughey et al. (1983) then go on to specify a long list of instructional objectives and responsibilities for the role of the teacher. The teacher is characterized as imparter of specific knowledge, provider of necessary organizational skills, simulacrum of the "real audience", and evaluator of the product.

But how "real" is the teacher as the sole member of the audience? The results of following even the most effective process of writing remain in a vacuum of sorts when the only plausible audience is the teacher. Those of us with experience as composition instructors know that telling the class to "write a paragraph to the president of this university explaining why there should be more Spanish classes offered each semester" is still just an artificial paragraph to the instructor

unless, of course, they are actually sent to the president. There is no question as to the importance of establishing a real audience in writing. Even a personal journal has an audience - the writer.

By establishing a frame or context within which the writing will be used to communicate may contribute greatly to the face validity of the testing instrument (See Savignon 1983). With the absence of a specified implied reader in a testing situation, where the learner is even more keenly aware of the real reader, the creation of specific writing purposes and roles that come bundled with context and meaning may well serve to help the learner better focus in on and consequently more clearly create the written message.

Rather than pursuing specific ways to test writing, based on the preceding observations I shall instead present the following general considerations for improving the testing of writing:

1) Provide plenty of opportunities for students at all levels to practice the type of writing that you expect them to do on the writing test.

Often, writing is avoided by instructors and students alike and saved for exam time. For example, in a second semester course where content may begin to shift towards social issues and other extra-curricular discussion topics, giving the students an essay test on an issue can be disastrous if they have only had the opportunity to listen

to and possibly discuss the issues with no opportunity to write about them. Periodic quizzes can be administered to measure student comprehension of the broad issues and necessary vocabulary before beginning to write about differing opinions and specific issues. Or, for example, in an introductory language classroom setting, students can practice short expository passages (e.g., writing descriptions of each other or of objects around them) before a testing situation where they are expected to write a description in order to use specific vocabulary.

Instructors who struggled for years to learn a foreign language as well as those who are native speakers often lose sight of the fact that learners have an incomplete second language linguistic system. It may not be realistic to formulate a writing task in a testing context that measures: orthography, syntax, accent marks and vocabulary, and then to expect an answer that conveys correct information. For many learners, this is cognitive overload. This first proposal essentially addresses the formulation of the writing task in global terms. Proposals 2 through 4 address these specific issues in the formulation of writing tasks.

2) Assessment of writing should reflect the goal of the course - errors in accentuation, spelling, and syntax must be kept in perspective with the overall communicative purpose of the test.

"Make sure all your accent marks are where they belong," says the teacher, "I'll be taking off half a point for each one that's missing - and that includes accents that are floating around above the word, too!" Don't laugh - many of us have said this to our students with the best of intentions. Realistically, students begin to have only a modest control of diacritics in writing at the sentence level after several semesters of study.

It has been demonstrated (Krashen 1984, Semke 1984, Zamel 1985) that the teacher's written corrections, often referred to as "the red pen", can do far more harm than good in helping students to produce written language that is more coherent (i.e., sticks to the subject at hand and makes sense) and mechanically precise (e.g., accent marks, spelling, syntax, etc.). Semke (1984) reported that marking formal errors on students' free-writing assignments was ineffective for increasing writing accuracy, and went on to suggest that the effect could even be detrimental since students reported that they had a more negative attitude toward the writing experience as a result of the teacher's written corrections.

Is this to say that we should let errors in diacritics, spelling, grammar, etc., just slide? Not necessarily. We must keep the issue of accent mistakes and omissions in perspective in each particular test. In other words, if the purpose of the writing test is to determine if

students know where accents go or how to spell *vosotros* endings (2nd person plural familiar pronoun in Spanish), then make that purpose explicit and count off as much as seems appropriate for missed accents and misspellings on those specific items and/or devise editing exercises that help them master those tasks.

Complete omission of diacritics in written Spanish does not make it incomprehensible. However, omitting diacritics does create ambiguity at times. This also may make a more global statement about the second language literacy of the writer. When a student asks, "How much do accents count on the exam?", a more appropriate response could be, "accent marks contribute to the meaning - without them the meaning may be unclear. The purpose of this test is for you to write as clearly and concisely as you can in Spanish." Then, when the student brings up her paper after the exam, rather than asking, "Did you check that all your accent marks are correct?", the teacher can ask, "Did you read this back to yourself? Is it clear? Does it say what YOU want to say?" Having the student say what SHE wants to say brings our philosophy of promoting communicative competence in the classroom (See Savignon 1983) into the reality of testing. This approach is also useful in helping the teacher "save face" when students discover that many native speakers' use of accents is inaccurate, inconsistent or non-existent.

3) It is important to test a variety of writing skills and to create

tasks of varying lengths.

It is not uncommon to hear students in the intermediate-level composition course lament that they never had to write anything longer than a one-sentence response to a specific question throughout their basic language instruction. And, to further sterilize their prior writing experiences, their written response was most often graded on its grammatical accuracy - rarely on its content. Traditional workbook exercises provide students with opportunities to write in the foreign language from the beginning of most curricula. Traditional workbooks are often the only writing practice students have, which can give the impression that writing is something they do because they have to, that it should be done alone, at home, when no one else is around, and that it's mechanical and dull.

Grading workbook exercises is also very tedious. Nevertheless, many teachers make tests that are based largely on these workbook exercises. I do not propose that we discontinue using traditional workbooks. I do propose that we keep in mind that workbooks are usually primarily for grammar and vocabulary practice. Writing solely in workbooks may be undermining the entire notion of writing as communication. Students need more non-workbook writing experiences and non-workbook style writing tests to offer them a broader base of writing skills.

Many supplemental writing activities can be introduced into an introductory course that students can use to practice diverse registers of writing. For example, filling out forms, writing letters, responding to a questionnaire, writing descriptions and directions, etc. (See Hedge 1988 for numerous writing activities). These varied writing activities all have ecological validity as they represent vital, real-world, and completely different kinds of writing skills. The most dynamic writing activity I have ever directed was having a group of migrant workers, to whom I was teaching basic literacy skills and ESL, write to the White House, asking that the funding for their classes not be cut. If their classes were cut, they would have no other formal instruction in English and would risk not having their legal working papers renewed. These men knew that their letters could make a difference and that there was much at risk.

We do not often have the same opportunity for that degree of immediacy in writing tasks in a foreign language classroom, but certainly we can provide more opportunities for writing that impact the students' lives in ways other than just a grade.

4) Plan tests to be shorter and more frequent.

Greenia (in press) describes a framework for a writing course that offers frequent, varied activities rather than a few massive writing activities that terrify students and are a nightmare to grade. This

seems more realistic and productive. Greenia goes on to show that lower division courses can follow the same principle of frequency and variety in formulating writing tasks. Just as a composition course need not culminate in a research paper, nor does a lower-level language course need to have a final writing activity that will pull all these varied experiences together. It may be enough for these varied experiences to stand as they are without a final cumulative written project. The fifth proposal examines writing checklists and profiles as flexible and consistent means of evaluating writing.

5) Writing evaluation checklists or profiles help protect the student against a biased or less-experienced teacher/evaluator and help the teacher explain her reasons for the evaluation (See Appendix for examples).

Once a variety of writing tasks have been formulated, a flexible means of evaluating those tasks must be designed. These evaluation profiles also tend to systematize an otherwise nebulous and frustrating grading procedure and make it go more quickly. If you are testing writing as defined as prose that conveys meaning, then grade the writing. Too often writing is synonymous with grammar, and whenever a student writes, the grammatical accuracy is first and most important. When evaluating longer answers or essays, checklists or other holistic evaluation criteria are tools that offer teachers a means of looking at

writing from a more "objective" standpoint. The evaluation forms guide teachers through specific questions about the students' essays, often in terms of, for example, content, comprehensibility, vocabulary, grammar, and style. Different evaluation checklists give different weights to these specified areas of evaluation. There is no single correct formula. The teacher must simply choose, or better yet, create a checklist that best reflects the goals of the course itself. A grammar course with a writing component could give more weight to grammar, whereas an introductory language course could give more weight to content, and a composition course more weight to organization. Students can use evaluation checklists as well to evaluate each other's writing.

Profiles and checklists help steer teachers away from just looking at one aspect of essays or from being biased against or for particular essays due to structure or content. Grading a student's writing with an evaluation checklist gives the student more questions to ask afterwards regarding her composition, and gives the teacher more help in answering student questions about how she arrived at the particular grade. When the evaluation profile is given to the student in advance, the checklist helps her remember to focus on all important aspects of writing instead of just grammar.

I taught more than 400 students EFL composition at one time at the University of Barcelona during the 89-90 academic year. I found that

having an evaluation profile saved my life when I simply could not have remembered why I had given a grade on a particular composition if the student had a question. In Spanish composition classes at the University of Illinois, a different profile is used for every essay assignment since different styles and techniques are stressed in each module of the course. This may seem cumbersome, yet testing is also supposed to help the teacher evaluate whether the students learned what was taught. A very specific profile helps to measure this with far more accuracy.

Responding to student writing with the use of an evaluation profile directs the teacher's comments to very specific areas of content and style of the student writing. This directed and specific feedback to the students opens doors for much more interaction between the student and the teacher, as well as between students. Detailed explanation of the parts of an evaluation profile and syntheses of results of evaluations of student writing can serve as points of departure for future lesson plans, creating a more context-rich rather than structure-rigid classroom environment. Instruction of specific grammar points and accentuation problems that have arisen or are anticipated can then be incorporated into a lesson as part of a holistic approach to teaching writing at the beginning level all the way through to advanced courses which require highly technical skills of

integrative genre such as literary analysis.

Taylor (1991) acknowledged the helpful role that these processes for organizing writing can have, but went on to underscore the importance of establishing the classroom as a discourse community by means of having students regularly share their writing with one another. In the third-year Spanish Composition course at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, students use electronic mail weekly to write short reactions in Spanish to topics of current interest posted either by the instructors or other students in the course. They also keep dialog journals which they exchange with a "journal partner" every week. These are effective ways to stimulate interest in writing. Within this discoursal framework, diverse skills can be practiced and then be more fairly tested.

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APPENDIX

SAMPLE GRADING CRITERIA FOR COMPOSITIONS

STANDARD CRITERIA FOR BEGINNING LANGUAGE COURSES

COMPREHENSIBILITY	Most is incomprehensible	1 2 3
	Generally comprehensible, but needs interpretation	4 5 6
	Completely comprehensible	7 8 9
COHESIVENESS	Composition is a series of separate sentences with no transitions	1 2
	Composition is choppy or disjointed	3 4
	Composition flows smoothly and has some style	5 6 7
INFO CONVEYED	Minimal information given	1 2
	Info adequate for topic	3 4
	Very complete info given	5 6 7
VOCABULARY	Inadequate/repetitious/ inaccurate/erroneous	1 2
	Adequate, but contains many errors	3 4
	Quite broad in range, precise and expressive	5 6 7

TOTAL: _____/ 30

SAMPLE CRITERIA FOR A COMPOSITION COURSE

Composición 1: La exposición

Puntos centrales:

I. La validez y la claridad de la idea central ("main point") del ensayo
II. El enfoque; la delimitación del tema

Criterios:

I. A. ¿Tiene el trabajo una idea central válida, expresada claramente en una o dos frases?

Sí: seguir a B.
No: Hay que establecer antes de proceder cuál es la idea central del ensayo.

B. ¿Esta expresada explícitmente esta idea central al final de la introducción o sección preliminar?

Sí: Seguir a E.
No: Seguir a C.

C. ¿Esta expresada explícitamente esta idea central al final del ensayo?

Sí: Seguir a D.
No: O el trabajo no tiene idea central, o esta metida al medio del ensayo. En cualquier de los casos, hay que expresar una idea central en el lugar apropiado.

D. Si el punto central está expresada explicitamente al final del ensayo, también tiene el ensayo puesto, al final de la introducción, un "punto preliminar" que capte el interés del lector y que le impulse a seguir leyendo?

Sí: Seguir a E.
No: Hay que revisar el final de la introducción para que exprese un "punto preliminar." Este "punto preliminar" puede plantear una pregunta, expresar una meta, hacer una observación clave, o en alguna otra forma anticipada para el lector las ideas que van a seguir.

E. ¿Es válida y relevante la idea central del ensayo? Nota: Para determinar la validez de la idea central, hay que determinar para quién está escrito el ensayo (quién es el lector anticipado) y cuál es el propósito del ensayo (que intenta el autor lograr con la escritura del ensayo). La idea central es válida y relevante si cumple bien el próposito, y si toma bien en cuenta las necesidades del lector anticipado.

Sí: Seguir a parte II.
No: El ensayo necesita una nueva idea central.

II. ¿Desarrolla bien el ensayo los temas y conceptos mencionados al final de la introducción?

A. Generalmente aparecen 2-3 veces por página las "palabras temáticas" mencionadas al final de la introducción?

Sí: Seguir a B.
No: Hay que revisar el ensayo para poder mencionar, de una manera natural, las "palabras temáticas" más frecuentemente.

B. ¿Tienen una relación natural y lógica las ideas expresadas en cada párrafo con la idea central, tal como la expresan las "palabras temáticas" y las oraciones temáticas?

Sí: Ha cumplido con los criterios.
No: Hay que revisar el ensayo para que las ideas expresadas se vinculen más estrechamente con la idea central del ensayo.

Evaluación:

Puntos centrales (versión 1): _____ x .90 = _____ / 90%

Forma (gramática, vocabulario, estilo) (versión 2):

_____ x. 10 = _____ / 10%

NOTA TOTAL (versión 3)=_____ %

Gran parte de la elaboracion de los criterios para esta composicion se debe al Prof. Gregory Colomb (Business & Technical Writing), "A checklist for marking/revising term papers and reports," ms. University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.