



Theory and Practice in Foreign Language Writing Instruction

Michael D. Hubert, *Washington State University*

Joshua D. Bonzo, *Washington State University*

Abstract

Foreign language (FL) instruction in the United States currently suffers from a lack of consensus regarding the teaching of writing within the FL curricula. Despite a series of advances in second language (L2) writing theory, many university FL instructors continue to use writing to focus almost exclusively on language surface form and do not encourage/require their students to focus on other deeper functions of writing. This case study investigated levels of knowledge of four of the most important L2 writing theories among 10 FL faculty members responsible for first and second-year FL curricula working at 6 U.S. universities. Participants also provided materials they use to teach FL writing and participated in a series of classroom observations which showcased their teaching of writing in the classroom. Results revealed overall very low levels of knowledge and implementation of mainstream L2 writing research among these participants.

Keywords: *Foreign language writing instruction; curriculum; second language writing; case study*

Introduction

Although the act of putting target language (TL) words on paper has become an integral part of the way that most foreign language (FL) courses are taught in the United States, both secondary teachers and university instructors employ a variety of techniques and practices which involve what can only loosely be termed “writing.” While most FL professionals appear to agree that writing should play a part in the instruction they offer to students (e.g. Hubert & Bonzo, 2010; Reichelt et al, 2012), these teachers and instructors appear to hold a set of widely-varying opinions on the types of writing that should be employed their students. Moreover, despite a series of advances in second language (L2) writing theory, along with repeated recommendations from L2 writing researchers, many university FL instructors continue to use writing to focus much more on language surface form than on anything else (Scott, 1996; Lefkowitz, 2009; Hubert & Bonzo, 2010; Reichelt et al, 2012). In their effort to expand FL learners’ skills as general language users (Lefkowitz & Hedgcock, 2009), many FL instructors

do not encourage/require their students to focus on other deeper functions of writing, such as genre, audience, rhetorical style, and so forth (Valdes et al., 1992; Way et al., 2000).

With the larger goal of grammatical instruction and/or language practice being pre-eminent in FL curricula, many U.S. university FL students address “writing” in the form of individual assignments which are designed purely as grammar and/or vocabulary-teaching tools; these are merely additional language practice modules that happen to be in written form (Omaggio-Hadley, 2001; Lee & VanPatten, 2003), and are not “writing” in the sense of producing any kind of composition above the sentence level (Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 2011). Given the specific needs of beginning FL learners, classroom practices that use writing as a tool to teach other language elements are very probably a good use of class time. However, these students should also benefit from the concurrent use of activities that focus on the skills involved in the production of quality communicative TL writing. Where the shift away from form-centered approaches towards a focus on communicative competence has been nothing short of seismic when it comes to the teaching of FL speaking, such has not been the case for FL writing (i.e. Scott, 1996; O’Donnell, 2007; Hubert & Bonzo, 2010; Hubert, 2014). We argue that 21st Century FL students have just as much need for true communicative competence in writing as they do in speaking, due to the fact that writing is such an integral part of nearly all professional endeavors in which these students will be engaged and for which they will use the FL skills acquired in high school and college (personal and professional correspondence; research, both in- and out-of-country; transcription work; dare we hope for professional authors as well?). Also, in keeping with the spirit of the *Comparisons* aspect of the ACTFL standards, students in both secondary and higher educational environments could greatly benefit from additional instruction in the aspects of quality writing that could also apply to their first language.

A brief survey of the institutions considered in the present study suggests that courses and resources exist not only in basic writing and composition at each of these institutions, but in expository, argumentative, technical, analytical, and rhetorical writing. These institutions have developed workshops, organizations, and centers where writing and the writing process are furthered. Additionally, some of these same institutions offer highly specialized training in writing for professional endeavors across different fields of research, such as health care industries, legal fields, engineering, and physical sciences. Regrettably, the same cannot be said to the same degree for the advancement of foreign language writing at any of these institutions. For



every language offered as a major or minor at these institutions, no more than two writing-specific courses were offered. Contrastively, multiple speaking courses were found for each of those same languages. It is clear that the call for more coursework and class time to be focused on communicative language teaching has been answered with regard to speaking and listening; writing as a foreign language discipline continues to lag behind.

L2 writing researchers work almost exclusively with English as a second language (ESL) learners, and the theory and practice generated by these scholars does not appear to have penetrated very far into university FL instruction (Hubert & Bonzo, 2010). While the reasons for this gap are not entirely clear at present (Reichelt et al, 2012), teacher training may play an important role. Where many ESL researchers possess degrees in applied linguistics, second language acquisition, and/or L2 writing, FL faculty tend to hold degrees related to the study of literature and/or culture, with very limited training in language acquisition theory and or FL teaching methodology based upon it. Furthermore, published L2 writing research generally does not appear in the same professional journals read by these FL faculty (Reichelt, 2001). Therefore, we believe that much of the writing instruction taking place within university FL departments may not be based on current theories of L2 writing and may just as often not be based on any theory at all, but on trial-and-error and the personal experiences of these faculty members. Perhaps due to the fact that L2 writing researchers and university FL faculty live and work in very different academic silos, the relationship between current mainstream L2 writing theory and FL writing instruction is at present very poorly understood (Hubert & Bonzo, 2010). The case study reported in this article attempts to take some of the first steps in bridging this gap.

10 FL faculty members working at 6 universities across the United States completed surveys in which they described their knowledge and application of four of the most important L2 writing theories: process theory, contrastive rhetoric, strategy instruction, and the debate surrounding explicit error correction. These participants provided materials they used to teach FL writing, as well as participated in a series of classroom observations which showcased their teaching of writing to their FL students.

Where previous attempts at understanding the relationship between L2 writing theory and FL writing practice have been limited to meta-reviews of in-print articles (Reichelt 1999, 2001) and



to survey research (Hubert & Bonzo, 2010; Lefkowitz, 2009; Reichelt et al, 2012), this study follows a much more detailed case study approach in which the instructional practices of a smaller, yet representative number of carefully-chosen FL instructors were closely scrutinized. Our research questions are:

1. How much do university faculty responsible for beginning / intermediate FL curricula know about current L2 writing research?
2. (How) does FL instructor knowledge of L2 writing theory translate into classroom practice?

Teaching and Research in FL Writing

According to a large and somewhat contentious body of research evidence, research and teaching should go hand-in-hand in university language instruction (Stern, 1983). Various professional language organizations have called for the integration of research and teaching in recent years and deliver this information in official reports and in statements of purpose and policy. For example, the Modern Language Association (MLA) has repeatedly called for those teaching higher education also to engage in research-related activities. The MLA Ad Hoc Committee on Teaching has stated that they “view scholarship as a prerequisite and a co-requisite for good teaching” (MLA, 2001), and that teachers’ scholarship should inform their classroom practice. Similarly, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), in the *Research and Teaching* section of their strategic policy goals, state that “day-to-day practice in English language arts classrooms must be informed by research collected through rigorous, systematic inquiry” and that “effective teachers draw on relevant theory and research in their daily work” (NCTE, 2008). It also makes a great deal of intuitive sense that the best teaching is that which is directly informed by the best available research. When it comes to FL writing, while instructors should be basing their instruction on the best available relevant L2 writing research, a large majority may have little to no training in how to teach writing (e.g. Scott, 1996, Lefkowitz, 2009; Hubert & Bonzo, 2010; Reichelt et al, 2012), and are therefore unable to do so. Additionally, there currently appears to be a high level of frustration among FL instructors, especially those working in higher education, regarding the teaching of writing. These colleagues, many of whom possess advanced degrees in FL literature and culture, express frustration at the lack of training in pedagogy they received during their graduate training, especially with regards to writing. Specifically, these instructors often complain that, aside from



a single methods course, they receive little to no additional training in how to teach, and aside from a single methods course module, only briefly touching on writing, and/or the training that they themselves have sought out and completed on their own dime, they know little to nothing about L2 writing theory. Others in this situation do not feel they need training in pedagogy to be successful teachers, and therefore may be missing out on many of the findings generated by L2 writing research.

The Current State of FL Writing Theory and Practice

Reichert (1999) examined 233 published works dealing with FL writing and research pedagogy in the United States. Conclusions drawn from this review include: (1) there [was at the time] currently no single forum for the publication of research targeting FL writing, (2) the majority of research in “L2 writing” is actually concerned with ESL writing, and (3) the majority of this research published in the U.S. appears in publications addressing FL professionals, suggesting that those authors see themselves much more as teachers than writing researchers. One of the main arguments put forth by this review article was the fact that many of the FL writing pedagogies observed in the reviewed articles are primarily concerned with using writing to teach grammar, with “grammar study and error corrections disguised as drafts, journals, and peer-editing” (Heilenman, 1991, p. 280 cited in Reichelt, 1999). Where ESL learners are prepared by instructors to use English in the real world outside the classroom, FL learners’ actual need for writing outside the classroom is much more limited, especially when directly compared to their need for other language skills.

Reichert (2001), in another review of 32 FL writing studies investigating the relationships between pedagogical practices and the texts produced by FL writers, highlighted an important problem in FL research: the lack of a “unified sense of the purpose” for writing within the FL curriculum (p. 578). Due to the fact that U.S. FL students are much less likely to need to use their FL writing skills outside the classroom than their ESL counterparts, it can be very difficult to determine what the purpose for writing should be for these learners. Reichelt (2001) calls for a discussion among FL professionals of the purpose of writing within the FL curriculum, along with a needs analysis for FL students that investigates (1) whether or not FL students will need to write in the FL after college / high school, or if they will be able to function well only writing in English, and (2) if writing should be used to enhance other aspects of language instruction over and above a focus on grammatical accuracy.



Reichert et al (2012), in their review of current issues surrounding FL writing, draw the strong distinction between what has been termed *writing to learn* (Lefkowitz & Hedgcock, 2009; Hedgcock&Lefkowitz,2011), and *learning to write* (Hyland,2003; Williams, 2005). This article draws heavily on the 2009 study conducted by Lefkowitz who, in interviewing 20 FL instructors working in the U.S., observed that few of these taught in such a way as to help their students actually become better writers in the FL. Instead, writing activities assignments “consistently emphasized grammatical correctness at the expense of communicative content” (Reichert et al, 2012, 28). Writing-to-learn approaches continue to appear to be very prevalent within FL instruction. These treat the act of writing, some solely, as additional opportunity for language practice, offering a concrete way for students develop skills in grammar and speaking, with the end goal of developing learner speaking proficiency (Omaggio-Hadley, 2001; Lee and Vanpatten, 2003; Shrum and Glisan, 2010). On the contrary, the end goal of learning-to-write approaches is the teaching of writing itself, and tends to include process-oriented activities largely absent from writing-to-learn approaches, such as brainstorming, group planning and discussion, and a deliberate focus on addressing purpose and audience and issues related to pragmatics, etc.

Hubert & Bonzo (2010) surveyed 153 FL faculty members working at universities across the United States. These instructors were asked to self-report on their levels of knowledge of four of the most well-known theories informing L2 writing instruction: (1) Process Theory, (2) Strategy Instruction, (3) Explicit Error Correction, and (4) Contrastive Rhetoric¹. They were also asked to offer an honest self-assessment of if/how their knowledge of these theories informed their classroom teaching. Hubert & Bonzo (2010) observed overall very low levels of knowledge and application of these theories by FL instructors. They further concluded that L2 writing research is not well understood by, nor available to these instructors, and that even those who did self-report as knowing more about these theories did not necessarily use that knowledge in their FL classrooms.

Methodology

Participant Demographics

A total of 10 FL faculty members participated in this study, 9 of which held a PhD in their fields of study, with the remaining participant holding an M.A. The types of degrees held by these participants varied greatly, as did their number of years of teaching experience, and these are

summarized in Table 1. All participant instructors were employed at the time at one of six universities located in different parts of the United States. Each FL faculty member was responsible for either teaching beginning or intermediate FL courses themselves, or for serving as the coordinator of at least one multi-section course taught by affiliated faculty, including non-tenure-track instructors and/or graduate student teaching assistants. Each participating instructors' expertise and guidance was in large part responsible for the content, scope and sequence of the beginning and/or intermediate FL curricula at these schools. In order to protect the identities of study participants, no additional description of each person will be given.

Table 1: *Participant Demographics*

Language	Degree	Degree Type	University Rank
Spanish	Ph.D.	Applied Linguistics	Associate Professor
Spanish	Ph.D.	Applied Linguistics	Senior Lecturer
Spanish / German	Ph.D.	Applied Linguistics / General Linguistics	Associate Professor
French / Spanish	Ph.D.	Applied Linguistics / General Linguistics	Full Professor
Spanish	Ph.D.	Applied Linguistics / General Linguistics	Associate Professor
French	Ph.D.	Applied Linguistics / Teacher Education	Assistant Professor
French	Ph.D.	Linguistics	Associate Professor
Spanish	Ph.D.	Linguistics	Assistant Professor
French	Ph.D.	Literature	Associate Professor
Spanish	M.A.	Literature	Senior Lecturer

Targeted universities are not identified in this article in order to protect study participants. However, the limited amount of information that we do provide here on the type and location of each university is very important to the design of the present methodology. 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 the largest, most prestigious universities for language teaching, we chose several larger schools.



Also, in order to avoid skewing our data towards large schools only, we chose several other smaller, less well-known universities. Three universities were selected from the western U.S.: one large public university, one small public university, and one small private university. Two were selected from the U.S. eastern seaboard: both large public universities. Two were selected from the U.S. Midwest: one large public university and one mid-sized public university. At the larger schools, the multi-section beginning and intermediate 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.

Data Collection

Participating FL faculty were first invited via email to complete an online survey. The complete survey can be found in the appendix to this article. Participants were asked to (1) define and/or describe each of the four targeted L2 writing theories, and (2) explain and describe if/how each theory informed their FL teaching. These online surveys were followed by telephone and in-person interviews with some of the participants when answers to online survey questions were ambiguous and/or confusing and clarification was needed.

All participating FL faculty were specifically asked to provide samples of instructional materials that showcased their knowledge of the four L2 writing theories, and to allow researchers to observe at least one of their courses². 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.

Data Analysis - Survey and Interview Data

Participant responses to the online surveys and telephone / in-person interviews concerning each of the four L2 writing theories were classified by level of knowledge using a 5-point ordinal scale adapted from Hubert & Bonzo (2010). This scale is found in Figure 1.

No Knowledge—Participant indicated he/she had no knowledge of the theory.

Basic Awareness —Participant demonstrated only very basic familiarity with the theory, but only a very limited way and with only a partial understanding of the theory's tenets and their application.

Limited Knowledge—Participant demonstrated only passive knowledge of the theory, with only a partial command of its tenets and their application.

Intermediate Knowledge—Participant demonstrated a fairly complete knowledge of the theory, partially synthesizing and/or condensing the information found in the theory, even if he/she did not appear to understand its full ramifications.

Excellent Knowledge—Participant demonstrated intimate familiarity with the theory, leaving little doubt of their (almost) complete understanding of the theory.

Figure 1: *Scale of Participant Knowledge of L2 Writing Theories*

Those respondents that stated that they had no knowledge of a particular theory, or if they attempted to explain the theory but did not answer correctly, they were assigned a rating of “no knowledge” for that particular theory. If the respondent was able to provide a very basic, one-sentence type definition of the theory, but nothing else, they were assigned a “basic awareness” understanding of the theory. Those providing one to two pieces of additional information were assigned a “limited knowledge” rating, and those providing. Those receiving “intermediate” and “excellent” ratings provided even more information (see Figure 1).

Data Analysis – Classroom materials and observations

Classroom teaching materials, including syllabi, writing prompts, rubrics, and assessments, along with other written activities, were carefully examined to determine if their design appeared to be informed by and/or integrated any of the four targeted L2 writing theories. As study participants were specifically asked to provide teaching materials that best showcased the way they taught writing, it was assumed that these represented the best chance of these theories being observed later in action in the classroom. Wherever possible, classroom observations were conducted during days in which writing assignments were given and/or when the provided

writing materials were being used in the classroom. Although this was not possible in all cases, in the majority of cases some facet of writing instruction was directly observed in the classroom. Classroom materials and observations were combined with faculty members' answers to the second half of the online survey regarding practical implementation in order to produce a rating for each study participant based on the simple scale presented in Figure 2.

<p><u>Does Not Inform</u> – No evidence that the theory informs participant teaching in any way.</p>
<p><u>May Indirectly Inform</u> – This theory appears to superficially inform participant teaching, including those cases where the tenets of the theory may look/sound like the observed methods used in the classroom, but participant survey answers did not indicate knowledge of the theory.</p>
<p><u>Appears to Directly Inform</u> – Based on survey answers, classroom materials and observations, this theory appears to be a direct source of information that helps to determine the methods employ in the classroom.</p>

Figure 2: *Scale of Participant Implementation of L2 Writing Theories*

Results

Participant knowledge of targeted L2 writing theories

Overall, the surveyed FL faculty (n=10) evidenced very low levels of knowledge concerning the targeted L2 writing theories in the online surveys and follow-up telephone interviews, as summarized in Table 2. For Process Theory, three respondents indicated that they had either “never heard of” the theory or had heard the title but were not familiar with its tenets in any way. Three additional respondents indicated that they were familiar with the basics of the theory, in that the writing process becomes as/more important than the final product, and that it involves multiple stages, including advanced planning, editing, and revision. The additional three respondents demonstrated increasingly more sophisticated understandings of process theory, including criticisms of and changes to the theory, along with how the theory helps to meet different learner needs. For Contrastive Rhetoric, half of respondents indicated they had never heard of the theory, with two participants explaining the very basics of the theory (the fact that different cultures employ different organizational patterns in their writing), and one respondent



demonstrating a slightly more sophisticated, and partially incorrect, understanding of the theory. For Strategy Instruction, four respondents indicated they had no knowledge of the theory, with three responding with a very basic “students should be taught to use strategies” answer. The remaining three respondents demonstrated a somewhat more sophisticated understanding of the theory, including an explanation of how this theory has changed in recent years. For the Explicit Error Correction Debate, four respondents indicated they knew nothing about the theories surrounding the debate, with the other six demonstrating an only slightly more advanced awareness, with most of these tying the debate to other SLA theories actually outside the scope of the immediate debate itself.

Table 2: *Participant knowledge of targeted L2 writing theories – Survey Responses*

	No Knowledge	Basic Awareness	Limited Knowledge	Intermediate Knowledge	Excellent Knowledge
Process Theory	3	4	1	1	1
Contrastive Rhetoric	7	2	1	0	0
Strategy Instruction	4	3	2	1	0
Error Correction	4	3	3	0	0

Participant Implementation of L2 Writing theories – Survey Answers

Overall, these FL instructors’ explicit explanations of the way(s) in which these theories inform their instruction produced a fairly impoverished data set on their own, as the majority of respondents had very little to say on the matter of if/how each theory informed their instruction. For this reason, the implementation ratings presented in Table 3 are based on these explanations in combination with classroom observations and provided teaching materials. Summaries of the way in which these theories were found to be integrated into FL instruction follow.

Table 3: *Observed FL Faculty Implementation of L2 Writing Theories – Categorizations*

	Probably Does Not Inform	May Indirectly Inform	Appears to Directly Inform
Process Theory	2	6	2
Contrastive Rhetoric	9	1	0
Strategy Instruction	4	5	1
Error Correction	4	3	3

Classroom Implementation of targeted L2 writing theories – Process Theory

The process theory of composition focuses on writing as a process rather than a product, and is centered around the concept of allowing and encouraging students to write using their own interests and their own language. Essentially, student voice is given priority, and L2 writers are free to explore different techniques and learn what TL readers actually respond to and what they do not. A critical central component of process theory informed instruction are peer activities in which the students themselves act as teachers, reviewers, and editors. The main observations that we draw from the present data set with regards to the implementation of process theory are the following:

1. The standard practice among FL instructors appears to be the requirement that students employ their background knowledge to provide information on a series of pre-determined topics that instructors perceive will be of interest to students. However, only one instance in which students were given any sort of creative “free reign” was observed, and writing topics, techniques and other aspects of the process were tightly controlled because of the fact that selected writing topics were used to introduce and/or reinforce targeted points of grammar.
2. Peer editing was observed in many cases, but instead of focusing on content and/or creativity, these assignments primarily focused on improving discrete vocabulary choices, grammar and spelling/mechanics. The largest number of points awarded to a particular group for ideas, creativity and/or content was 20 points out of 100. Similarly,

writing grading rubrics were observed to be extremely form-focused, with very little weight ($\leq 20\%$) given to creativity and content

3. In most cases, the process of producing academic writing involved some variant of the pre-writing, writing, post-writing sequence. First, students were given a certain amount of time, ranging from 10-15 minutes in class to longer periods on their own time before class, to brainstorm and to plan what they would write about, usually individually. Next, students wrote their compositions individually and silently during class time in order to control the process and avoid cheating. Lastly, a post-writing phase was completed in which individual or peer revision of what they had just written was carried out. Again, most of the time these post-writing activities also focused on form instead of on content.

Classroom Implementation of targeted L2 writing theories – Contrastive Rhetoric

Contrastive Rhetoric is the study of how a learner's L1 and their home culture influence their writing in an L2 (see Connor, 1996, 2002 for an overview of the finer points of this theory). Kaplan (1966) first observed that writers from different L1 backgrounds organized their writing differently. Connor (1996, 2002) further expanded on this theory, leading the field to expand their acknowledgment of the number of more genres with specific textual requirements and increasing awareness of the social contexts of writing, among other important issues. We assert that one of the main functions of contrastive rhetoric informed instructions is to teach students to meet the organizational and cultural needs of their perceived reader audience. The primary observations that we draw from our data set regarding this theory are the following:

1. Almost all observed writing topics were chosen in order to teach students targeted grammar and/or vocabulary by drawing upon their background knowledge, with no regard whatsoever given to the needs of a real-life audience other than the teacher that would be immediately observing these students' writing. The primary social aspect of writing so crucial to this theory was found to be entirely absent in nearly all cases.
2. Only in one French class was any sort of TL-centric organizational pattern observed, that of *these, antithèse, causalité, synthèse*, in a lesson in which the instructor was teaching students the French argumentative style of writing. All other observed activities did not appear to take into account the organizational patterns of the targeted culture.

Classroom Implementation of targeted L2 writing theories – Strategy Instruction

Strategy instruction involves providing students with explicit information regarding the different cognitive strategies involved in, among other activities, the creation of a written text. Also called *Cognitive Strategy Instruction*, this approach emphasizes the development of thinking skills and processes as a means to enhance learning with the aim of helping students to become more strategic, self-reliant, flexible, and productive in their learning endeavors (Scheid, 1993). The primary observation taken from the present data set regarding this theory is that strategy instruction was also nearly entirely ignored and/or minimized by the observed instructors. Other than using FL textbooks that occasionally offer different cognitive strategies as part of their instruction, no other instances of the explicit explanation and/or practicing of writing or other strategies was observed in any of the provided teaching materials or in any of the classroom observations.

Classroom Implementation of targeted L2 writing theories – Error Correction

The debate regarding error correction of student written assignments has been spearheaded by John Truscott (e.g. 1996, 1999, 2008), who has called the efficacy of the practice of providing explicit correction of grammatical errors on student writing assignments into question. On the other side of the debate, the practice has been vigorously defended by Dana Ferris (e.g. 1999, 2003, 2006, 2010). The main question to be answered in this debate is whether or not error correction leads to student learning, and not simply short-term gains in the quality of single writing assignments. Truscott (1999) has argued that nearly all teachers spend a great deal of time and energy correcting student grammar in writing assignments, and that this correction is (entirely) ineffective and does not lead to learning, where Ferris has argued against a hasty abandonment of a time-honored practice that may still hold long-term benefits. Our primary observations taken from the present data set regarding this debate / theory are the following:

1. Even though errors were not overtly corrected by instructors, there still appears to be a strong need by instructors to identify errors in grammar, so students can correct them. Regarding writing assignments not performed for grammar practice specifically, three of the institutions provided error-correction codes as direct feedback to students, and all of them but one overtly indicated that self and peer-editing should consider grammar (the one common guided instruction given from all institutions considered).
2. Grammatical accuracy continues to hold a majority of attention as far as grades are concerned. Based upon the rubrics and feedback provided to students, only one



institution placed “writing content” higher in importance than grammatical accuracy when determining the final grade. All others placed grammatical accuracy (either as a stand-alone criterion or across two different ones, such as “editing” and “form”) as the highest weighted criterion. One institution placed almost one-half of the total points awarded to students’ final writing projects on creating error-free products.

Discussion

Research Question 1

The present data appear to paint a fairly clear picture in answer to our first research question: *How much do university faculty responsible for beginning / intermediate FL curricula know about current L2 writing research?* First off, of the 10 FL faculty members surveyed for this study, 6 held an advanced degree in applied linguistics and/or second language acquisition, with two others holding degrees in the general linguistics of their FL, and only two with degrees in FL literature and no apparent formal training in pedagogy and/or language acquisition. On the one hand, these results in themselves are encouraging, based solely on the fact that the universities selected for inclusion in this study were specifically chosen based on their size and geographic location (both large and small school located across the United States), and on their reputations for language teaching. The fact that more FL faculty members with advanced degrees in fields closely related to pedagogy are currently responsible for beginning-level FL curricula at these types of schools would appear to be a positive sign, and hopefully represents a move towards beginning and intermediate-level FL curricula that are based on a more complete understanding of current language acquisition research. However, when it comes to FL writing, the present results reveal extremely low levels of knowledge of current L2 writing theory among this group, even from some of the most experienced, most successful, and highest-ranking FL professors with the most years of experience teaching who participated in this study. Several of the participants indicated during their interviews that the (small) amount of teacher training they received as part of their degree did not include much information on L2 writing, and others, that their ongoing professional development does not involve additional training in pedagogical theory or L2 writing theory. In short, the targeted L2 writing theories, which arguably make up a significant portion of what constitutes the “core” of current L2 writing research, are largely absent from the awareness of many U.S. university FL faculty members.



Research Question 2

In response to our second research question: *(How) does FL instructor knowledge of L2 writing theory translate into FL classroom writing practice*, the present data paint a very interesting and complicated picture with regards to the kinds of writing employed in these FL classrooms, and strongly suggest that the targeted L2 writing theories may only peripherally inform the classroom teaching of many FL instructors working with beginning and intermediate-level students. The vast majority of classroom observations and analyses of provided syllabi and other classroom materials (such as grading rubrics) revealed that writing (not the act of composing, but the putting of words to paper) continues to be used to introduce, reinforce and practice grammar, vocabulary, and speaking skills almost exclusively. Lacking among nearly all courses and institutions observed was direct writing instruction, including pre-writing (see below), editing for content (though grammar editing was present), and consideration of audience and genre of writing (exposition, persuasion, etc.). Instead, the present analysis of participant surveys, observed classroom instruction and teaching materials suggests that writing-to-learn activities far outweighed their learning-to-write counterparts in all of the observed classrooms, and in many of the observed composition assignments. That is not to say that some tenets of these theories were not observed, but those that were observed appeared to be treated superficially at best.

Most of the observed courses required at least two formal compositions, worth between 5% and 20% of the final course grade. With regard to written drafts, among those courses where formal compositions were required, any form of multi-draft system for eventual completion and grading by course instructors varied greatly in terms of their apparent adherence to the tenets of process theory, contrastive rhetoric, strategy instruction, and explicit error correction (see the discussion above regarding how each of these theories was represented).

Among the course compositions that did include pre-writing activities, two stood out as clearly asking students to engage in content planning and brainstorming, while simultaneously requiring targeted grammar (mostly) without any overt mention of that grammar. Many, however, were more-heavily focused on preparing students to use the grammar they would need on assignment activities; brainstorming and planning for content were often overshadowed by a stronger, almost dominating surrounding focus on grammatical accuracy and correction. Most of the guided writing activities observed in this study required students to complete their initial draft



during class time, ostensibly to avoid student cheating. These drafts were not apparently expanded upon later for content (thus preventing additional strategy instruction). These writing activities varied greatly in design as well, from several very grammar-centered examples to one much more open-ended and less deterministic example, in which the grammar to be found in eventual student compositions took a solid back seat to the successful communication of an intended message.

Of the surveyed faculty, only one included peer review activities as a part of the multi-draft composing process, while all other faculty surveyed provided solely instructor to student feedback. Regarding error correction, all surveyed faculty indicated that they do correct errors, with about half relying on some form of coding system rather than simply marking the error and giving the correction.

Conclusions

The present results support the assertions made by Hubert & Bonzo (2010), that knowledge of current mainstream L2 writing theory and practice continues to be largely absent from the awareness of the U.S. university FL instructional community. The present data also echo findings from Lefkowitz (2009), in that instructor focus on grammatical correctness was almost unilaterally found to overshadow the need to help students actually become better writers. Unlike ESL instruction, novice and intermediate FL writers most often do not actually learn to write in their courses. FL instructors tend to use writing to springboard the teaching of the other skills, most notably grammar and speaking.

One of the major outcomes of the move from functional/grammatical competence towards communicative competence in the 1970s was the explicit teaching of spoken communicative strategies, which now comprise one of the most fundamental aspects of the communicative language teaching approach. Sadly, similar strategies for the production of effective communicative written texts appear to be largely absent from much of our modern approaches to FL instruction. If one of the primary goals of university FL curricula is to prepare students to use the FL beyond the classroom, then we argue that functional, communicative writing skills should play a role in this type of instruction. Leki (2002) has referred to writing as “a privileged and or particularly potent means for effecting [social change]” and “a primary means for participation in international disciplinary conversations” (p. 60-61). In addition, the American



Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has called for teachers to encourage learners to use the TL in both spoken and written form outside of the classroom in a number of ways in their *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century*. Even the aim to prepare students for more advanced FL work (including formal writing in the language of learning) at the university seems unfulfilled; it can be frustrating for university faculty teaching upper-division courses in literature, linguistics, culture, or other content topics to try to assign communicative writing assignments dealing with their topics to students with very little training in actual FL writing (not to mention frustrating for their students). Current L2 writing theory posits that writing is not merely “speech written down,” but is its own communicative process (Silva & Matsuda, 2002). This process requires a very different set of skills than those developed by the FL speaker. The teaching of these skills appears to be largely absent from much of U.S. university FL instruction.

While the present research does highlight the clear lack of writing-as-a-skill approach, we also wish to stress that we are not calling for a paradigm shift in the way that writing is approached in the FL classroom. However, we assert that more can be done in FL classrooms to train students to become successful writers than is presently practiced. Accomplishing this will require additional training of current and future FL instructional faculty. During the latter half of the 20th Century, progressive language teaching has experienced a dramatic shift in focus. Where previous approaches focused on the language system as an end in itself, the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach differs significantly in that this underlying focus is changed from an emphasis on form to an emphasis on the use of the language system for the genuine exchange of information (Cook, 2003). Success is no longer supposed to be measured solely in terms of grammatical accuracy, but by learner ability to accomplish linguistic tasks by using the language in appropriate and effective ways. This shift has very clearly taken root in the way in which many FL curricula approach the teaching and use of speaking. However, this same type of shift does not appear to have happened for FL writing as of yet. As the shift from form to communication has occurred in FL speaking, we would posit that FL writing should experience a similar shift in focus, a shift that has already taken place with ESL instruction and is reflected clearly in current L2 writing research. If FL instructors are to teach actual communicative writing skills, then a focus on communication is needed, just as it is in speaking. Just as grammar is at the service of communication in CLT-informed speaking instruction, FL grammar should serve the writing process, and not the other way around. Focusing on the teaching of FL writing itself,



on the solving of the rhetorical problem, followed by giving students the grammatical tools they need to produce that writing, would go a long way towards beginning to make this change. Such an approach can be implemented even in beginning classrooms (Dykstra-Pruim & Redmann, 2011).

Implications for Instruction

The present results strongly suggest that more penetration of L2 writing theory into the U.S. university FL faculty population is needed (see Hubert & Bonzo, 2010; Reichelt et al 2012). Unfortunately, the majority of available L2 writing research is found outside the normal research venues generally inhabited by FL faculty (See Reichelt, 1999, 2001 for meta-reviews on FL writing research available before 2001). In order to find information on current L2 writing theory, FL faculty should reach out to the ESL research community, either through the reading of articles published in journals such as the *Journal of Second Language Writing*, *Written Communication*, *TESOL Quarterly*, and/or *System*, or through invitations to L2 writing experts working in other departments or universities to give colloquia presentations or similar venue for the sharing of ideas regarding writing. FL department administrators and other faculty seeking to improve the quality of writing instruction within their curricula should consider offering formal training sessions for instruction on the different aspects of writing (See Reichelt et al (2012: 36-37) for a more detailed discussion on ideas for training FL instructors). Additionally, the training of future FL teachers should consider language writing training specifically as a more integrated part of the teacher-training curriculum.

With regards to the writing instruction currently being offered in FL departments, faculty should carefully consider the overarching goals and outcomes that direct the design and delivery of language instruction being offered, as well as the specific needs of their FL students. How much of our writing instruction is geared towards actually helping our students become better writers? How much is designed to teach and/or reinforce other aspects of the language? By carefully evaluating the overall design and perceived (and perhaps unexpected) outcomes of the writing assignments they offer, and considering the ramifications of their writing prompts, guided writing activities, pre- and post-writing activities, and assessment rubrics, FL faculty can arrive at a clearer picture of the effect of their writing instruction on their students' acquisition of both the TL itself and TL literacy skills.



Future Research

The present research suggests that we do not yet have a clear understanding of FL students' attitudes and perceptions of the role that writing plays in their language learning. We would strongly assert that future research on this topic should be firmly focused on the needs, attitudes, perceptions, and skills of FL writers; Reichelt (2001) and Reichelt et al (2012) have called for a renewed interest in and investigation of FL writers' needs, specifically with regards to how these needs differ from other L2 learners. A limited amount of research suggests that FL students do consider writing to be very important to their language learning (Hubert, 2012). This study also found that the vast majority of these students plan to use their FL writing skills in their future endeavors, even those enrolled in beginning-level classes.

Additionally, researchers (as well as instructors) should consider the existing writing skills that students bring with them to the FL classroom. Awareness of the specific abilities FL writers possess prior to entering the classroom is sorely needed. Faculty awareness of existing abilities of students can and should help shape curricular development. Therefore, in addition to surveying the perceptions that FL students hold regarding the role of writing in their TL learning, researchers should determine the degree of awareness FL faculty and instructors have of their students, and the degree to which that awareness shapes their specific FL curricula (with particular attention dedicated to the role of writing in the FL classroom). This type of analysis should be followed up by a suitability analysis of the different aspects of L2 writing theory. Some L2 writing theories and approaches are obviously more suited to the needs and abilities of FL writers, and an analysis of the best way to implement these strategies into FL instruction should be carried out once we have a clearer picture of the FL students, as well as a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between the attitudes, skills, and perceptions of students and the perceptions and awareness of these by their instructors with regards to the role of writing in the FL learning process.



Notes

1. For a complete explanation of the targeted theories, along with an explanation of how each can and should be applied to U.S. university FL instruction, see Hubert & Bonzo (2010).
2. We would assert that any possible bias to the present data brought about by each participant being under direct scrutiny from an observer does not detract from the validity of these findings. On the contrary, even if these instructors were to behave differently while being observed, they were not able to craft writing instruction based on information that they did not know, which is the entire point of this study. Seeing each instructor potentially “at his/her best” we believe strengthens our argument further.

Biodata

Dr. Michael Hubert (PhD, Perdue University) is an associate professor of Spanish and American Studies at Washington State University. His areas of research include second language acquisition with emphasis in second language writing, pedagogy and teacher training, Spanish phonetics/phonology, and translation studies.

Dr. Joshua Bonzo (PhD, University of Texas at Austin) is a clinical associate professor of German and American Studies at Washington State University. His areas of research include second language learning, language writing, language pedagogy, and text analysis.



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Appendix

Survey Instructions and Questions

In the spaces provided on the following pages of this survey, please define/describe **as completely as your own knowledge will allow** the major tenets of each of the four theories listed in the following pages of this survey. Please address at minimum the following in your discussion:

- Name any authors you associate with each theory
- What claims/assertions are made by each theory?
- What criticisms have been leveled against each theory?
- What, if any, changes have been made to each theory since its beginnings?
- How has each theory shaped and/or informed (foreign language) instruction?

***NOTE** – It is very important to the validity of this research that all responses be based on the personal knowledge of each instructor taking the survey. Therefore, please respond using **only your own knowledge**, and not external sources (i.e. other people, the Internet, scholarly journals, dictionaries, etc.) If you only know very little (or nothing) about one or more of these theories, please indicate this, as we are interested only in what other foreign language instructors currently know (or do not know) about these theories. **Please remember that your responses will be kept completely anonymous.**

- 1. Process Theory of Writing** – (Instruction and assessment focuses not only on final product, but on the process of composition, including situating writing in context)
- 2. Contrastive Rhetoric** – (Different cultures use different organizational patterns in their writing)
- 3. Strategy Instruction** – (Writing strategies are explicitly taught to students during the writing process)
- 4. Explicit Error Correction Debate** – (The debate surrounding the question of whether or not explicit correction of grammar on writing assignments lead to student learning)