

Improving Instruction and Assessment of the Forgotten Skill: Writing

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The popularity of the communicative approach and communicative method in language instruction has finally given life to the focus on speaking ability in the foreign language classroom. Unfortunately, teachers seem to forget the other form of communication which is an integral part of the language learning process: writing. Valdés, Haro, and Echevarriarza assert that “most foreign language professionals have taken the position that writing is a ‘secondary’ or less crucial skill than listening, speaking, and reading” (333) and they repeat Herzog’s statement that many schools with language majors, even government language schools, do not test writing skills in their end-of-course assessments. Herzog was referring to the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center’s Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT), and she is correct in her assessment as are those who have quoted her. Very often, major language proficiency tests such as the College Level Examination Program (CLEP) world language exams, do not include a writing section in their assessments (The College Board); however, the Standards-based Measurement of Proficiency (STAMP) assessments do contain a reading, writing, and speaking test (Avant Assessment). Because of this general lack of focus on writing ability, one vital aspect of foreign language learners’ education has often gone underdeveloped.

Teaching Foreign Language Writing

Writing is the skill which seems to receive the least emphasis in foreign language classrooms. Because of this, the problems which are often evident in foreign language (L2) learners’ writing are self-perpetuating. For example, it was said that writing in a second language tends to be more constrained, more difficult, and less effective than writing in a first, or native language (L1), and that second-language writers plan less, revise for content less, and write less fluently and accurately than first-language writers. Writers of a second language would be more effective and would plan and revise more often if they were taught to do so from the very beginning of their foreign language training. Experience shows that students who write well in English have been able to apply their writing strategies from their L1 to their L2 writing assignments. However other students who have not been taught how to approach writing assignments do not have the tools necessary to successfully write in their L1, much less their L2. Therefore, it is even more important for language programs to include instruction and assessment of writing in the foreign language because the backwash from that instruction has potential to improve their L1 writing ability as well.

Valdés, Haro, and Echevarriarza point out, based on their research, that paragraph-level writing ability in foreign language learners is not normally manifested until the learner achieves an intermediate-high proficiency. Dvorak states that this is partly due to a failing of mainstream foreign language classes to go beyond the focus on production of “correct” forms and on “transcription” (qtd. in Valdés, Haro, and Echevarriarza). This fits in with past practices of direct method and audio-lingual curricula which focused on precise repetition of set dialogues and exact dictation of teachers’ readings

as a way of teaching writing in the foreign language classroom. The goal now should be to move beyond these antiquated methods and to refocus our instruction on the use of writing assignments in enhancing foreign language instruction.

Beyond Conventions and Current Research

Valdés, Haro, and Echevarriarza pose an interesting question based upon research which indicates that young children who are not confined to strict spelling conventions write coherently and meaningfully long before it had been expected that they could do so; and as such, this concept could apply to foreign language learners as well. Valdés, Haro, and Echevarriarza's research provides results which indicate that second language writing is enhanced by a person's L1 writing ability; but it is not clear as to the level of influence the L1 ability has. Factors such as L1 and L2 similarities play into the transfer of strategies between languages, and future research needs to attempt to take these factors into account. One of the goals of Valdés, Haro, and Echevarriarza was to stimulate thought in the foreign language teaching profession in order to effect a change in the way teaching of writing is approached in the L2 classroom. Sadly, the ideas and beliefs about foreign language writing have not developed much in the 21 years since this article was published. It is hoped that the advent of more media-based language education such as Internet chat, email, and blogs will result in an increase in the opportunities for foreign language writing.

Forsythe, Whitmer, and Osboe conducted a research project in 2004 which demonstrated the benefit of using Internet chat in L2 writing instruction because all of the participants demonstrated an improvement in their writing ability after participating in a project of Internet chatting in their foreign languages: American students of Russian chatted with Russian students of English and both groups demonstrated the ability to incorporate newly learned words and phrases into their L2 vocabulary. Since this project was conducted, extensive research has been conducted into the propriety of using technology to enhance L2 students' writing. Yunus, Nordin, Salehi, Embi, and Salehi provided a thorough review of the pros and cons of using technology in teaching L2 writing skills and concluded that,

Despite the existence of many studies showing positive effects of using Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the teaching and learning process in general, the use of ICT in teaching writing skills in ESL classrooms is still not very encouraging. (1)

Assessing L2 Writing

A second issue which must be addressed at the onset of effecting a change in the conduct of writing education in the foreign language classroom is how to assess it adequately and equitably. Weigle provided a wealth of knowledge about assessing writing and the scoring of such assessments. The underlying theme she addresses is the necessity for writing to be "an act that takes place within a context, that accomplishes a particular purpose, and that is appropriately shaped for its intended audience" (8). In order for the writing to be an accurate assessment of a student's ability, the construct and prompt must be written to specifically elicit a writing sample which demonstrates the desired traits in writing which are to be assessed. For example, when attempting to gauge a student's ability to construct a properly-written paragraph about a given topic, the prompt should direct the

student to approach the task with a clear understanding of what they are expected to produce and what the scoring criteria will be. If the teacher expects a paragraph to contain at least five sentences and include a minimum of one topic sentence, the students must be informed of this prior to beginning the examination. It would also be helpful for the students to know what scoring criteria will be used, such as by stating that spelling will only be counted as an error if the meaning is affected, or that the task will be graded holistically based upon the teacher's assessment of their ability.

Choosing the correct type of scale is dependent upon the test's construct. It is very important that the test developers consider and determine the type of scale to be employed prior to completion of the test's development process. Weigle provides a thorough explanation of the types of scales which can be used in grading a writing sample and also provides their pros and cons, the listing of which is not warranted here due to space constraints. Whether a holistic, primary trait or analytic scale is used, the test developer must state the purpose of the examination and choose the best scale to measure that construct.

Once the appropriate scale is determined, the test developer must also prepare a scoring rubric to accompany the exam. This rubric must be explicit in its instructions to the scorer so as to increase the potential for high inter- and intra-rater reliability—the equal skills of correction among different scorers and with the same scorer across different papers. Granted, a scoring rubric for a subjective writing test cannot be all-encompassing, but the developers can specifically delineate the desired traits to be exhibited in the students' writing samples. It is important to keep in mind that the rubric may have to be revised periodically because of the fact that students will invariably present samples or traits which are not dealt with in the rubric and these examples must be added or amended to the rubric for future reference. Tests, along with their answer keys and scoring rubrics, are living documents and must be periodically reviewed, revised, and updated in order to maintain their relevance and validity.

Weigle presents a final item for consideration: necessity for rater training. This applies to both solo and multiple raters so as to ensure equitable assessment across all of the samples. All raters should familiarize themselves with the criteria set forth by the developers and establish what traits they are expecting prior to the commencement of the rating. In order to further ensure accuracy and fairness, all samples should be rated by at least two raters, or if there is only one rater, they should be independently reviewed and rated twice.

Weigle addresses one major problem with her recommendations for establishing such thorough and intense scoring protocols: the fact that it requires a lot of time, effort and manpower to accomplish. This is the greatest challenge that teachers face in increasing the emphasis on writing in the classroom. Many teachers may have a desire to focus on improving students' writing ability, but the constraints of limited class time and their personal desire to actually have a life outside of class pressure them into foregoing many of the opportunities for improving students' writing ability in their courses. This is not meant to assign blame or chastise teachers for this decision; it is simply a reality of teaching foreign languages and the fact that most students will have limited need for competent writing ability in their foreign languages makes the choice to de-emphasize writing skills an easy one to make.

Conclusion

Language teachers must approach L2 writing instruction from a different angle. Writing is too important to simply allow it to be foregone due to time limitations. As Valdés, Haro, and Echevarriarza

state, a student's L1 writing ability has impact on their L2 writing strategy. This means that writing ability does not need to be built from the ground up like speaking and listening skills may need to be. Teachers need to seize any opportunities which present themselves in order to refine students' writing skills, and one of the best ways to do this is to provide them as many chances to practice as possible. Writing assignments do not have to be full-blown, report-length tasks; writing can be worked into daily homework assignments such as reviews of current events and journal entries. Teacher's feedback does not need to be detailed and all-encompassing for each sample, simple notes in a margin to guide style or correct major errors will suffice to continually improve a student's writing ability and to allow the students to bolster their own interest and self-confidence in their L2 writing.

Once students have become accustomed to writing in their foreign language, teachers can begin to formally assess their ability by designing appropriate tests or examinations which are specifically geared toward the rating of writing or its many traits such as grammatical accuracy, spelling, sentence construction, and thought conveyance. In order for these tests to be a successful assessment tool as well as an instructional tool, they must be developed appropriately for the construct they are designed to measure. Weigle presents excellent guidelines and important consideration points for those developing assessments of writing ability. In sum, an informed, deliberate approach is necessary to boost the importance of writing in the foreign language classroom and to ensure that the assessment of the students' writing samples is equitable and pertinent.

Works Cited

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