

## Chapter 5

# Teaching Foreign Language Writing

**Hypothesis: *Teaching FL writing is essential at all levels of language study.***

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- The prose model approach
- The experiential approach
- The rhetorical approach
- The epistemic approach
- A linguistic system approach

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## TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGE WRITING

### Hypothesis

*Teaching foreign language writing is essential at all levels of language study.*

The focus of instruction at the elementary and intermediate levels of language study is typically on listening and speaking.<sup>1</sup> Students are encouraged primarily to develop skills that will help them communicate interactively in the target culture. Writing, or composition, is often reserved for advanced-level grammar, literature, and civilization courses. However, teachers in advanced courses are frequently dismayed by the quality of students' writing. They complain that students are ill prepared for the kinds of writing assignments that are required in their courses. And, very often this assessment is true.

If one of the goals of FL instruction is to prepare students to write in upper-level courses, teachers must reexamine their approaches to teaching FL writing at the beginning stages of language study. The hypothesis governing the final chapter of this book states that teaching writing is crucial at all levels of language study. While the preceding four chapters describe many considerations with regard to teaching FL writing, this chapter will review different approaches to teaching L1, ESL, and FL writing, the research in teaching writing, and the design of writing tasks in order to propose a sound approach to teaching writing from the beginning levels of FL study.

## APPROACHES TO TEACHING L1 WRITING

Prior to World War II, L1 writing instruction in the United States involved primarily responding to the reading of great literature. Since that time, the teaching of canonical literature has become much less relevant and there has been no single model of writing instruction (Faigley, 1992). However, until quite recently, the *classical rhetorical tradition* dominated theories of writing instruction. This tradition views writing as a kind of performance with a specific textual shape and a fixed way of achieving it. For example, a mode, such as persuasion, is considered to have a formulaic pattern consisting basically of an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. This kind of regimented structure presupposes that form is the key to good expression. Modern rhetoric, however, which emphasizes the writing process more than the features of finished texts, is gaining in acceptance.

It [modern rhetoric] is preoccupied with the writer's choice-making in the development of texts, the exploratory movement of mind, the discovery of connections among ideas, the progressive testing and reformulating of statements. Having had little preparation in the history of discourse theory,

teachers tend to be unfamiliar with the richer concepts of modern rhetoric—"composing process," "writing-as-learning," "coherence," "revision," . . . (Knoblauch and Brannon (1984, 4–5).

Current thinking in L1 composition instruction holds that teachers have a responsibility to teach the conventions of writing, the form, and the discourse modes, while not ignoring the highly individualized cognitive processes of writers. This thinking reflects a subtle shift in the instructional paradigm from the notion that writing can be taught to the notion that writing is a competence that is nurtured and develops with application (Knoblauch and Brannon, 1984, 4).

There are many approaches to teaching writing in English composition. While the approaches differ, there is a sense among most teachers today that attention to the writing process is as important as attention to the final product. Donovan and McClelland's *Eight Approaches to Teaching Composition* (1980) reviews the most common approaches practiced today: the process approach, the prose model approach, the experiential approach, the rhetorical approach, and the epistemic approach.

### □ THE PROCESS APPROACH

According to this approach, teachers focus on what students need to experience rather than what they need to know. Moreover, teachers and students work together in a collaborative fashion to make meaning. (See chapter 2 for more information regarding writing as a process.)

### □ THE PROSE MODEL APPROACH

In this approach, students read and analyze a text and then model their writing after the example text. The focus of instruction lies in identifying and imitating various rhetorical modes. The prose model approach is often criticized because it can intimidate students, since it places an emphasis on form, rather than on content. Eschholz (1980) discusses an approach that combines the prose model approach with the process approach to teaching writing by requiring students to write a great deal, by having individual conferences with students, and by introducing prose models when students need them.

### □ THE EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH

This approach is based on four premises: 1) the best student writing is motivated by personal feelings and experience, 2) writing from experience can be done in many modes of discourse, including expository and academic modes, 3) writing from experience generally requires that students write for a readership that is

often someone other than the teacher, and 4) the structure of writing is learned as one shapes ideas for oneself and for an audience. This approach commonly integrates the process approach in that it focuses on learning by doing (rather than studying rules), peer editing, and self-assessment (Stephen, 1980).

### □ THE RHETORICAL APPROACH

According to this approach, writing is not a mysterious process but rather an art that can be taught. Lauer's (1980) approach is novel in that she contends that students need to begin with questions, not answers, as they organize and develop their thoughts. She further maintains that teaching writing as a rhetorical art involves showing students how description, narration, classification, and evaluation can be used to structure any paper. The example she uses is of a freshman assigned to write about the private world of relationships. The student chose to write about a relationship with a high school friend who ultimately committed suicide. While engaging in this expressive writing, the student was guided in her exploration of the topic, working through several stages of recalling the relationship in order to clarify it and discover new dimensions. The teacher directed her to first define the relationship, state her own values, and put into words the question she had often asked herself with reference to why her friend had killed herself. She then wrote a *static view*, or a description, of her friend, and a *dynamic view*, or a narration of the events, in their relationship. In the *relative view*, she compared herself with her friend, classified the type of person her friend was, and wrote an analogy comparing her friend to a coconut—rough on the outside and sweet on the inside. At this point, Lauer suggests that the teacher may interact with the student, pointing to avenues of further inquiry. Finally, Lauer suggests that the student choose the audience for the paper.

### □ THE EPISTEMIC APPROACH

According to Dowst (1980), the epistemic approach begins by reviewing the fundamental aspects of each approach to writing:

. . . formalistic (emphasizing *language*), referential (emphasizing *language* and *reality*), expressive (emphasizing *writer* and *language*), and rhetorical (emphasizing *writer*, *language*, and *reader*) (Dowst, 1980, 68).

He further says that the epistemic approach includes *writer*, *language*, and *reality* and connects writing and knowledge. The students spend time not only exploring what they know about the world but also exploring what they know about language and prose. That is, they may describe the facade of a church and then later work on what they know about describing.

## □ A LINGUISTIC SYSTEM APPROACH

In a very different vein, Horning (1987) proposes that the development of writing proficiency in formal, academic English involves learning a new linguistic system in much the same way adults learn a second language:

Basic writers develop writing skills and achieve proficiency in the same way that other adults develop second language skills, principally because, for basic writers, academic, formal written English is a new and distinct linguistic system (Horning, 1987, 2).

In supporting her view, Horning cites Krashen's Monitor Theory of second language acquisition,<sup>2</sup> stating that it can be applied to teaching native language writing as well. The Monitor Theory is founded on five hypotheses: 1) that learning and acquisition are two distinct processes, 2) that there is a natural order in acquisition of grammatical structures, 3) that learning (as opposed to acquisition) functions only as a monitor for output, 4) that language is best acquired when the input is comprehensible yet challenging, and 5) that acquisition takes place when the acquirer is motivated, self-confident, and has a low level of anxiety. In line with Krashen's Monitor Theory, Horning proposes six corollaries regarding native language writing:

- 1) The written form of language constitutes a second language.
  - 2) Much like skill in a second language, writing skill develops through processes of acquisition and learning.
  - 3) The acquisition of writing skills comes about in an ordered fashion.
  - 4) What students learn in the basic writing classroom functions only as a monitor on the output of the writing skills they have acquired.
  - 5) Comprehensible input is essential if language acquisition is going to take place.
  - 6) The affective filter must be down (not operating) in order for students to acquire writing skills.
- (Horning, 1987, 2-5).

She further points out that written language is acquired through reading, internalizing patterns and principles of redundancy, and through a process of hypothesis testing:

Writers formulate hypotheses about written forms and then test and revise their production in order to develop their own system of written language use. Writers must have an opportunity to test their writing out on readers and get feedback, particularly if they are basic writers (Horning, 1987, 25).

The approaches to teaching L1 writing are different yet they intersect and overlap in many ways. However, teachers and researchers who favor one

approach over another can be aggressive about their choices, and the underlying principles of each approach are often a source of debate. Although teachers might argue about the best approach to teaching writing, most would agree that writing is an important skill, critical for ensuring academic success.

## APPROACHES TO TEACHING ESL WRITING

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The most important difference between teaching L1 writing and L2 writing is mastery of the language of expression. In native language writing instruction, the teacher assumes that the students have fundamental control of the language. In second-language writing instruction, on the other hand, students' command of the language plays a critical role. Raimes (1983) points out that there are many features that writers have to deal with when writing in a second language. Mechanics, word choice, grammar, and syntax are added to features such as content, organization, the writing process, and the audience. Given the constraint of the second language, most approaches to teaching ESL writing include a focus on both form and content.

In her book *Techniques in Teaching Writing*, Raimes (1983) discusses six different approaches to teaching ESL writing: 1) the controlled-to-free approach, 2) the freewriting approach, 3) the pattern-paragraph approach, 4) the grammar-syntax-organization approach, 5) the communicative approach, and 6) the process approach. While some of these approaches are similar to those used for L1 writing instruction, they all include some degree of concentration on L2 language development.

### □ THE CONTROLLED-TO-FREE APPROACH

This approach stresses the importance of grammar, syntax, and mechanics. Generally taught sequentially, teaching writing first involves sentence exercises and then paragraph manipulations. Most of the writing is strictly controlled by having students change words or clauses or combine sentences. When students achieve mastery of these kinds of exercises, typically at an advanced level of proficiency, they are permitted to engage in autonomous writing.

### □ THE FREEWITING APPROACH

In this approach, teachers value quantity over quality in writing and do minimal error correction. The focus of instruction is on content and audience. Students are encouraged to be concerned about fluency and content and give cursory attention to form. Proponents of this approach consider that grammatical accuracy will develop over time.

## □ THE PATTERN-PARAGRAPH APPROACH

This approach involves the analysis and imitation of model texts and stresses organization above all. By imitating model paragraphs, putting scrambled sentences in order, identifying or writing topic sentences, and inserting or deleting sentences, students are taught to develop an awareness of the English features of writing.

## □ THE GRAMMAR-SYNTAX-ORGANIZATION APPROACH

This approach requires students to focus on several features of writing at once. The writing tasks are designed to make students pay attention to grammar and syntax while also giving them words such as *first*, *then*, and *finally* to organize their text.

## □ THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

The purpose and audience are the focal points in this approach to writing. Students engage in real-life tasks, such as writing informal and formal letters.

## □ THE PROCESS APPROACH

Like in L1 writing instruction, there has been a shift in focus in ESL writing instruction from product to process. That is, rather than concentrating only on the final product, teachers are facilitative in helping students discover ideas, plan, draft, revise, and edit. The first draft is not expected to be error-free, and teacher feedback is designed to help students discover new ideas, words, and sentences to use on future drafts.

While the process approach in ESL has gained in favor, some teachers question the validity of this approach for developing writing skills necessary to survive in the academic community. In reaction to the process approach, many ESL writing teachers have adopted an approach called “English for academic or special purposes,” in which the focus is on academic writing tasks designed to teach students to write prose that will be acceptable in the American academic setting (Silva, 1990; Leki, 1992).

## APPROACHES TO TEACHING FL WRITING

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There are no clearly defined approaches to teaching FL writing *per se*. When writing is taught in the FL classroom, it is usually incorporated into the overall goals of a lesson. For example, if the focus of instruction is narrating past events,

students may study past tenses, and the writing assignment might require them to tell about something they did in the past. Therefore, an examination of approaches to FL teaching in general provides the best insight into how FL writing is taught.

After World War II, during the 1950s and 1960s, the *Audiolingual Method* was the dominant approach in FL teaching. This approach, which owed its beginnings to the Army Specialized Training Method,<sup>3</sup> was founded on behaviorist psychology and stressed the notion that language was speech, not writing. Oral language was learned through pattern practice and reinforcement; writing served only as a support skill for speaking activities. The 1970s gave rise to the notion of communicative competence, which stressed the view that language involves the negotiation of meaning and applies to both speech and writing. Writing instruction focused primarily on real-life tasks such as taking notes, making lists, and writing letters.

The publication of the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* in 1986 marked the beginning of proficiency-oriented approaches to FL teaching.<sup>4</sup> The guidelines define proficiency in speaking, listening, reading, and writing at four basic levels: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior. This document has had a profound impact on the FL teaching profession, primarily since it serves both as assessment criteria and instructional guidelines. That is, the generic descriptions give FL teachers both explicit ways to evaluate students' proficiency and guiding principles for improving proficiency in each skill.

With regard to teaching writing, a proficiency-oriented approach involves designing activities that help students perform at a given level of proficiency as described in the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*. (Appendix A shows the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* generic descriptions for writing.) In general, proficiency-oriented approaches to teaching writing are quite eclectic. Some teachers may focus on developing students' command of grammar and syntax, while others may stress practice of language functions, such as describing or expressing an opinion. In her book *Teaching Language in Context*, Hadley (1993) discusses activities that range from making lists and completing open-ended sentences for novice-level students, to writing simple descriptions and narrations for intermediate-level students, to sentence combining and guided compositions for advanced-level students. Most proficiency-oriented approaches incorporate the notion that writing must be taught as a process with activities for planning, editing, and revising.

Some FL teachers argue that the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* do not accurately describe what students are capable of writing at each level of proficiency. For example, at the Novice-Mid level, the guidelines give the following description of ability: “Able to copy or transcribe familiar words or phrases and reproduce some from memory. No practical communicative writing skills.” At the Intermediate-High level of writing proficiency, the guidelines state that “an ability to describe and narrate in paragraphs is emerging,” but that students “rarely use basic cohesive elements, such as pronominal substitutions or

synonyms.” Given the research that supports the notion that writing competence is transferred from L1 to L2 (as discussed in chapter 1), some researchers argue that students do not necessarily begin writing in the FL with no practical communicative writing skills or little understanding of organization.

Regardless of the approach to FL teaching, writing is generally taught after students have studied the target language for two or more years. A typical third-year course focuses on grammar and composition, and teachers often rely on writing topics provided in the text. Some texts use a prose-model approach, while others suggest writing topics that are related to grammar, content, or a reading selection. Ultimately, teaching FL writing has been given relatively little attention, and teachers design instruction based on their individual sense of how students learn to write in a FL.

## RESEARCH ON TEACHING WRITING

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There is very little research on what teachers actually do when they teach writing. Cumming’s (1992) study is unique in that it provides information about the characteristics of successful writing teachers. By analyzing the behavior of three successful ESL writing teachers, he found that there are certain types of teaching routines that can be observed. He lists six fundamental routines: 1) attracting students’ attention, 2) assigning tasks, 3) collectively constructing interpretations, 4) establishing criteria, 5) providing individual feedback, and 6) guiding individual development.

## THE WRITING TASK

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The fundamental concern when teaching writing involves assigning topics that are relevant to students’ lives in order to engage their interest and motivate them to communicate their thoughts and feelings. However, just because the topic is important to students, does not necessarily mean that they will want to write about it:

Whether the topic is “summer vacation,” “abortion,” “women’s rights,” “violence on TV,” or “premarital sex,” it’s equally inert and undynamic, even if names a potentially significant range of student experience, as long as it’s unaccompanied by incentives to personal engagement beyond the requirement to produce a certain number of pages for a teacher’s scrutiny (Knoblauch and Brannon, 1984, 106).

Motivating students to write can be elusive because the assigned topic is often arbitrary and artificial. However, Knoblauch and Brannon (1984) contend that when the teachers play collaborative roles, never dominating nor insisting on

their personal views, students will be more likely to engage in the scholarly activity of exchanging ideas regardless of the topic. Also, given that the teacher is usually the sole audience, it is imperative that students sense that the teacher is genuinely interested in what is being said and not only on how it is being said.

While teacher attitude can be critical in motivating students to write, the writing task itself plays an equally important role in determining the success of the writing experience. Above all, the writing task must serve as a *prompt* to activate students’ background knowledge and personal experiences. According to Kroll and Reid (1994), there are three basic kinds of writing prompts. A *bare prompt* is simple and direct and states the entire task. For example: “Do you favor or oppose the death penalty? Why?” A *framed prompt* presents a set of circumstances. For example: “The issue of obesity in America is gaining in importance. Recent statistics suggest that at least 30 percent of all American adults are substantially overweight. Most European adults, however, are not obese. What is your view of this issue? You may use personal experience in your answer.” A *reading-based prompt* provides a text of varying length, and the student writer is asked to summarize, explain, or interpret the text.

Kroll and Reid (1994) stress the importance of designing prompts that will allow student writers to demonstrate their ability to write rather than to decipher a writing prompt. They cite the research of Hamp-Lyons, Johns, and Tedick in proposing the following variables that should be carefully considered in designing a writing prompt:

- 1) the writing situation (contextual variables), or the context in which the writing will occur, such as an entrance or exit exam, etc.;
- 2) the subject matter (content variable), or content based on a body of knowledge to which all writers have access;
- 3) the wording of both the prompt and the instructions (linguistic variables), or precise and unambiguous directions;
- 4) the task(s) (task variables), or the number of tasks that students are asked to perform, such as “choose,” “identify,” “give examples,” etc.;
- 5) the rhetorical specifications (rhetorical variables), or the way a student is instructed to approach the content, such as “compare,” “contrast,” “illustrate,” etc.; and
- 6) the scoring criteria (evaluation variables), or a clear definition of how the writing will be judged (Kroll and Reid, 1994).

Careful consideration of the various features of the writing task is not necessarily simple. Figure 1 shows a checklist for preparing writing tasks that takes into account many features, including purpose, the language used, the nature of the instructions, and the time allotted.

The most common writing tasks for FL students at the elementary and intermediate levels are *narrative* or *descriptive*. These kinds of tasks require students to tell a story by organizing events in space and time or to evoke an image of people, things, or places. For example, teachers often design communicative