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Why Johnny Can’t Escribir: Composition and the Foreign Language Curriculum

George D. Greenia

THE intermediate- or advanced-level writing class for foreign language majors is one of the most durable components in the traditional curriculum. Though sometimes designated exclusively a course in foreign language composition, it is just as often packaged with advanced conversation and grammar. Frequently, however, the writing component is not taken seriously, and many teachers bundle writing practice with their other activities and give it a decidedly subordinate role. I have taught such a course for years in alternation with colleagues in my university and, like many other professionals in the field, we have concurred with some chagrin that conflated areas of concern like conversation, composition, and grammar cannot receive adequate attention in one class (Gutiérrez). The joint billing in the course catalog at least gave us the flexibility to modify content as different instructors stepped in.

“Writing” has many meanings, but, as used here, it entails learning to craft clear sentences and arguments that reveal the mind of the writer and engage the critical interest of a reader. Even offerings officially labeled courses in writing and devoted to composition alone may be listless and unfocused affairs. Whether students are promised a course completely devoted to writing or one in a combination of skills that presumably reinforce writing, their progress by the end of their college program is frequently marginal. Two traditional assumptions underlie this neglect of writing within and across the language curriculum. First, a great deal of the writing done in foreign language courses is considered an adjunct to a more “worthy” goal, mastering grammar—an objective that may be endorsed all the more keenly because the designated writing course is not uncommonly the last grammar course in the undergraduate curriculum. Second, a truly autonomous writing course might end up an odd satellite in the curriculum, marginalized by faculty members unfamiliar with its true purpose who do not see it as related in content or purpose to other advanced Spanish, French, or German courses in the major or minor. “Writing about what?” is the question that would drive any evaluation of the course by other instructors in the language concentration. And the only evidence they might seek for the writing program’s success would be the grammatical quality of the papers generated in later courses in literature and civilization.

Ideas about what writing is, how it helps students learn a foreign language, and what it can ultimately be used for have all changed in recent years. For language instruction in general there has been a major shift from the teaching of language, with its paradigm of normative input—language replication, toward the teaching of parole, with its paradigm of authentic input—language creation (Swaffar 33). In particular, we now know that learning to write well demands considerably more than mastering grammar. Research suggests that writing merely to learn grammar seems to benefit neither, whereas students unconsciously absorb considerable linguistic sophistication through extensive reading and writing within a communicative community. Most writing done in foreign language classrooms in the past consisted of transcription exercises on the phrase or sentence level, exercises that did not train students to frame extended arguments and expositions. It certainly did not require critical thinking. If students ran aground writing papers for subsequent courses in their second language, the reason may have been that practice in real writing tasks began too late and suffered from shortsighted goals. Johnny can’t escribir mostly because we have not trained him to.

The energy inherent in a fresh look at writing for foreign language study will ultimately suggest class activities and assignments that are clearly emerging in English composition (Beach; Berlin; Hedge; Osterholm) but barely being explored in second-language work. The recent exceptions to our slow assimilation of this territory have generally

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been nourished by work on English as a second language (Adelson; Bereiter and Scardamalia; Boyle and Peregoy; Connor and Kaplan; Kroll; Whalen). A few authors of second-language textbooks are now making substantive contributions to expanding our thin repertoire of opportunities for writing (Bretz, Dvorak, and Kirschner; Kulick and Toner; Valdés, Dvorak, and Hannum). My comments here are meant to provide a rationale for improved curricular design. Actual course content will vary according to the skill level, the mission of the department and institution, the interests of the instructor, and the writing needs of the students.

Rethinking the principles for using writing across the foreign language curriculum, and not just in a designated foreign language writing course, is a stimulating professional challenge. And an unexpected offshoot is a revaluation of the alliance of composition, conversation, and grammar, but with the last two now clearly at the service of the first. The following list of practical guidelines offers points of departure for making writing a central concern throughout the process of learning a new language.

1. The writing course should have its own place in the curriculum, but it should not stand alone as the sole undergraduate writing experience in the second language.

Writing practice in undergraduate foreign language programs might be graphed in two ways, representing "poor" and "good" models.

Even what I have labeled a "poor" or insufficient program of writing in an undergraduate curriculum might be somewhat optimistic for many colleges and universities. It suggests that at least during the lower-level courses everything designated "the composition course," there will be real writing practice, as opposed to transcription or sentence-transformation exercises. This practice would include doing simple communication exercises, listing, composing social notes and invitations, leaving messages for third parties, reporting news, giving advice, and so on (see Larson and Jones; Gaudiani). Ideally, there will be a progression toward higher registers of free written discourse, although in many programs the lower registers are rarely practiced again after initial exposure to them. They never become reliable writers' tools by themselves or serve as building blocks for higher-order skills. Then during the writing course some unspecified process is supposed to take place that will enable students who do advance to upper-level courses to absorb the erudition pumped out at them and, at the end of the term, to produce massive chunks of polished formal-register writing (with good vocabulary and grammar, of course). It is not an unlikely scenario: many upper-level courses conclude with a single major essay assignment, ten pages on Don Quijote or Baudelaire or Faust.

A better model would embrace considerably more writing practice of all sorts throughout elementary and intermediate courses. The writing course, however it is sequenced in the curriculum, is a watershed experience,

Writing in Undergraduate Programs

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elementary          | advanced
but professors teaching other language classes should not expect students to emerge from it able to write consistently at an advanced level. Our upper-level literature and culture courses should include many forms of writing practice, a good deal of it "guided" writing in some form. The writing and prewriting experiences should be interrelated and tied to the content of the course. Only a few writing tasks should require formal discourse, and assigning a small project in this register as a capstone exercise should be an option, not a necessity. While this model involves a lot more work in course and curriculum management for the teacher, it will pay off in the superior writing and language skills the students acquire and in the amount of content they absorb. Not all the exercises have to be graded by any means, but all should be read for content and responded to.\footnote{Merely because students can handle similar exercises in their English classes, we cannot automatically assume that they have the lexical or syntactic muscle to do comparable work in a foreign tongue.}

Inadequacies in this area could understandably cause a loss of face for us as instructors and frustration for the undeniably bright college students enrolled in our advanced courses. We know that the same young adults are more than competent to do literary or cultural analysis in their native tongue, and we (and they) feel stymied when their language skills break down as they try to do similar work in their second language. Our discouragement could even lead us to unfounded suspicions that language majors are just not as smart as their peers in physics or psychology or that the language barriers confronting class lectures and discussions and student writings will condemn both teachers and students always to work on a relatively inferior intellectual level. We should remember that, while our students may not be able spontaneously to "use written language effectively for formal and informal exchanges; hypothesize and conjecture; write all types of correspondence and short research papers; support points of view, defend hypotheses" (Superior-level functions \cite{Omaggio 237}), they can perform other partially guided or structured writing tasks that display deep critical thinking and advance their language skills.

2. Writing in the foreign language in itself has not proved an effective vehicle for learning grammar. Improving grammatical accuracy and usage should not be a goal that controls the design of the course, although it will probably be a strong by-product. When students learn how to check their own grammar during the editing process (rewriting, proofing), their long-term retention tends to be significantly better.

Current research suggests that teacher-learner grammars—when distinct from native speaker (internal) grammar or descriptive (linguistic) grammar—are not ultimate goals but mere aids to language use. The grammatical control we hope our students will acquire is best absorbed when writing is foregrounded as a communicative skill. In fact, research on second-language writing has come to two conclusions: (1) writing improvements are unrelated to grammar study, whether of traditional or transformational variety, and (2) intensive correction of student writing, which has a negative effect in terms of student attitudes and motivation, has little positive effect at all \cite{Dvorak 51-52}.

Having a personal investment in the content of a text, even a formal text, lends an urgency to composition, obligating the writer to communicate clearly. Under those circumstances, the writer willingly consults a reference grammar when it can best serve this purpose, principally during the final revision and editing (Lalande). Incorporating grammar manuals as reference tools rather than as primary texts actually enhances retention of the grammar that language learners look up for themselves. Mistakes
that are challenged by a sympathetic reader because the
desired message is coming across muddled are mistakes
that trigger real learning when the text can be modified or
revised grammatically (Dvorak).

According to Ballman, the syntactic complexity and
accuracy of students' writing do not benefit from gram-
mar study either. She also suggests that a single term of
study may not be enough to effect a measurable change in
writing quality; an extended program of conscientiously
diversified writing assignments over several semesters is
probably necessary to produce substantive improvement.
Faculty members would have to cooperate closely to rein-
force writing skills in different contexts and beyond the
designated "writing course."

Grammar, of course, still has a place in the curriculum
at the intermediate and advanced levels, and specifically
in the designated writing course. Research merely suggests
that grammar study does not improve the clarity or crafts-
manship of student writing, nor does focusing on grammar
correction in writing samples. Whether the instructor sup-
plies the corrections or inserts codes and demands recopying,
students show no improvement in formal accuracy in subsequent assignments. Lalande found, however,
that his student subjects did improve significantly in
grammar and orthography by having error-correction
codes inserted into their compositions if they kept track
of their own recurring mistakes. He favors the correction
of all surface errors, but his study does not try to assess the
quality of the communication, argument, or structuring of
the writing assignments. In contrast, Semke concurs with
Dvorak that "corrections do not increase writing accuracy,
writing fluency, or general language proficiency, and they
may have a negative effect on student attitudes, especially
when students must make corrections by themselves" (195).
The students in Semke's experiment who received only
responsive comments on their work and whose gram-
mar was not corrected at all actually spent the most time
on their assignments and were the most motivated to seek
advice on correcting the mechanics of their writing.

By coaching learners on key elements of good style and
on conventions of diction and format for the genres prac-
ticed and by monitoring their steps in the writing process,
the composition instructor can accelerate the process of
their gaining a simple performance mastery of written
communication. This type of coaching is not the whole
answer, of course, because writing courses alone cannot
transform a student into a truly proficient writer. Skill in
creating written discourse is too complicated ever to be
transmitted (i.e., systematically learned) through a formal
course. Krashen and other authors cited by him (especially
Smith) have shown that real competence in writing must
stem at least in part from the learners' reading a large vol-
ume of texts that model the types of prose they will event-
ually create. Reading allows an individual to acquire a
sure sense of how a given sort of text is forged and pre-
sented to a reader. But there are needs besides voluminous
reading. Smith points out that even good readers are not
transformed into good writers unless they perceive that
their efforts will be successful (i.e., that the process will
not be too difficult or onerous) and that they are already
members of the implicit discursive "club," the community
that produces and consumes the forms of written discourse
in question (Krashen 25–26).

The consequences for the foreign language curriculum
of this natural sequence of extensive reading and then
writing are not entirely clear. Should students take a com-
prehensive writing course in English before undertaking
any of the required courses for the foreign language con-
centration, on the presupposition that a knowledge of
generic writing styles will readily transfer from one lan-
guage to another? Or would a foreign language composi-
tion course covering widely diverse types of writing and
taken early in the major or minor better serve students' personal long-range language goals and provide stronger
carry-over skills for later courses? Are German and English
personal letters or interpretative essays, for instance, so
different from each other that examples in the target lan-
guage have to be explicitly rehearsed? Is the recursive link
between reading and writing more a matter of exposing
students to an ample variety of syntactic structures and
functional constructions, so that they will absorb enough
language to build their own second-language voice (Cum-
mins, cited by Krashen)? Does a writing course make any
sense if students have not read enough second-language
material in previous courses? This last consideration can
be a major stumbling block, since many programs favor-
ing traditional grammar instruction shorten reading,
making almost no attempt to foster reading for pleasure in
the foreign language or, in the now classic phrase, to "get
kids hooked on books." This essay offers provisional
answers to some of these questions, but firm empirical
results await further research.

Finally, is the ability to produce serious writing (acade-
mic or otherwise) really a skill that can only be expected
of advanced, perhaps graduate-level students? Clearly the
answer is no. Writing is a complex craft, but it has its lower
registers; and while the volume of language produced is low
compared with that involved in speaking, listening, and
reading, the payoff in enhanced language competence
(including grammatical competence) is inversely high.
Reserving composition instruction for upper-level courses
presents a real danger: if students must wait to practice
writing until near the end of a traditional language pro-
gram, when they are exposed almost exclusively to literary
texts, they may be equipped to write only about literature.

3. A foreign language writing course is a valuable language
course in and of itself; it is not a service course to prepare stu-
dents for something else.

We often hear colleagues claim that students who have
completed the writing course still have problems with
grammar or that if we are not preparing them to write
good papers for the advanced courses we are not helping
them face their future. First, I hope their future as writers
is a little brighter and more varied than what that com-
ment implies. Rehearsing some of the simpler registers of
self-expression in a language is a profitable learning strat-
ey in itself (Magnan). Besides, students may need or pre-
fer to express themselves in writing in ways we cannot
predict. Practicing many levels and forms of written dis-
course gives them the greatest flexibility. And, as Hornig
has shown, mastering academic discourse even in one’s
native language is like learning a second language. Such
writing has its own unique rules and conventions, and its
own psycholinguistic features differ from those of oral lan-
guage. If training in academic prose is chosen as an explicit
goal of a foreign language curriculum, it will demand that
teachers commit themselves to a special methodology and
provide students with extensive practice.

Second, we can change the nature of our students’
future as members of a community in dialogue by assigning
different writing tasks. Academic discourse also has its
own building blocks. Exercises in isolating elements of a
literary author’s style—techniques of sequencing para-
graphs, metrical diversity, lexical patterning, and so on—
can be transformed into short prose expositions that can
be springboards to higher-level free-writing analytical
assignments. But we should share such strategies with our
colleagues; there is no way to refute a charge like “Your
writing students did not come into my course adequately
prepared.” “Prepared for what?” is the question. Actually,
we all have rather different hopes for our students’ writing,
and we should each accept responsibility for preparing stu-
dents to learn modes of formal analysis by course. Step 1 is
to liberate the writing course from misplaced expectations.

4. Second-language writing should not be conceived of as
primarily a literature course in another form. Neither is it
to convey a certain corpus of cultural information,
although a rich cultural component makes good use of our
knowledge and experience as a writing community, helps keep
interest high, and allows the vocabulary of the target language
its logical semantic field of collateral relations. Writing in
the foreign language should aim at an increasingly subtle control
of authorial voice, social register, and reader appeal.

The grammar-composition course is one of the most
stubbornly traditional offerings in foreign language curricu-
la, and with the recent theoretical investments in (and
pedagogical celebration of) oral-aural language skills,
competence in writing has not had as much attention from
the best minds in our field as have these more interactive
proficiencies. Usually positioned at the intermediate or
advanced level, the grammar-composition course, as I
have noted, often serves as the capstone to students’ for-
mal language training, after which they “graduate” to
their “real goal” of literary study.

But we need to remember that grammatical exactitude
and literary finesse—the goals closest to our hearts as lan-
guage teachers, trained linguists, and literary critics—may
not be the personal goals of our students. Many students
have fallen in love with Hispanic or francophone or Ger-
mn culture and want to gain depth in it without neces-
sarily duplicating our careers. We should bear in mind
that the educational and social purposes of written com-
munication go far beyond the study of literature, or else
we may find that we are really using a foreign language to
teach a creative writing course as well as a grammar course,
and students may feel that they cannot live up to the
expectations of either.

Well-written pieces in any language register (informal to
very formal), including literary (very formal) registers, can
serve as effective models if they can help students derive
patterns for their own writing. Composition courses should
include forms distant from academic writing and apart from
the disciplines others associate with our professional pub-
lications. Topics covered can form a logical series over the
term (“The Individual and Society between Cultures”), or
they can be organized into self-contained subdivisions
(“Relations between the Sexes,” “Alcohol Here and
Abroad,” “How Spaniards Handle Personal Stress”). Writ-
ing for content—communicating ideas and problems that
matter to writers and their reading community—is the
best way to keep writing from devolving into grammar
practice and to help it be a critical intellectual exercise for
all concerned.

Language registers are not the same as genres, although
expanding the repertoire of functions of writing to include
such tasks as producing short notes and messages, filling
out forms, and taking lecture notes will effectively cover
all the natural registers of written language use. It is cru-
cial to strive to integrate all levels of writing, since it is
impossible to tell what sorts of writing students will have
to produce in the future. This breadth of exposure should
also encourage them to use their second language in a
wider variety of contexts when opportunities appear.

In my own classes, students are required to make
weekly contributions to a public bulletin board: to rec-
ommend movies, review recent rock concerts, look for
study partners in chemistry, or advise fellow students,
during preregistration for the coming term, about which
professors to sign up for and which to avoid. The medium
allows total freedom of content but mandates that the
message be brief, low-register, and direct. My students
and I also exchange dialogue journals that probe serious
topics such as date rape on campus, AIDS, the qualities
of a new college president, and the merits of a sorority
system that enforces superficial conformity and superficial
friendships. Here the register is higher and more delibera-
tive, the voice more intimate although still public, since
the most incisive reflections will be circulated electronic-
ally within the class (Grenia). Students in my litera-
ture classes are required to contribute a certain number of
exam questions, which they sign and post for everyone.
This task is a writing exercise in itself, and any student
who runs aground on one of these questions is free to call
the author to discuss the answer in the target language, a
conversation that serves both students as a prewriting
exercise before the exam.

5. A focus on writing for exchanging and engaging ideas puts
students with varying language strengths on a more nearly
equal footing, since it is their ideas that count most here, not
the quality of their grammar. Mechanisms for peer review and
coediting can put some students' strength in grammar at the
service of their classmates.

The composition class is often the course where under-
graduate language majors and minors coming up through
the ranks meet the students coming in from outside. If a
foreign language department's multiple-skills "writing" course is really a conversation class, where fluency
and vocabulary are prized, or a grammar review class, where
morphological control and syntactic intuition get acade-
mic reward, then instructors are going to end up with a
desperately mixed group. This is a persistent (and under-
standable) complaint of teachers who handle this course:
students range so widely in ability that some are lost, oth-
ers are bored, and all are frustrated, intimidated, or defen-
sively smug for their own reasons.

But once teachers move the enterprise from a realm
based on mechanical production to one based on content
and ideas, the group tends to level out and collaborate on
the basis of its members' individual gifts. Male and female
students clarify their personal positions on date rape as
they design campus brochures in the target language to
alert incoming foreign students about how Americans
understand their own dating scene. Students with clear
notions about how to make the college or university more
environmentally responsible can collaboratively design
second-language fliers and action checklists for other
readers of that tongue, with some students contributing
more by providing ideas and others by editing and correct-
ing grammar. The emphasis should be on peer-managed
writing projects that have specific communicative goals.

The acquisition of a full range of writing skills, however,
often has only an uncertain relation to the learning tasks we
assign. Researchers are still a long way from identifying
a firm sequence of writing types as they are absorbed by
second-language learners. Progress in language skills is
rarely orderly or clean, and students' intimacy with a given
subject or their unique cognitive habits (a taste for alle-
gory, a vivid sense of color or sound, a combative spirit)
may affect a particular assignment, resulting in an unex-
pectedly high level of writing. Students should choose
what they want to say and a personally effective style; we
facilitate the recursive processes and show students how to
apply metaskills (self-correction, peer-review strategies,
adjustment for audience). As teachers, we must encourage
students to try their hand at a wide variety of writing styles
and to capitalize on the strengths that emerge, so that they
will continue to grow as writers after they have passed
through our courses.

Such collaboration is somewhat counterintuitive within
our profession. We almost always compose in solitude; ego
investment and personal identification with what we write
are high—logically enough, since academics get them-


selves jobs, promotions, and raises with what they write.
But most of the writing our students will be doing in class
and in the future aims at refining and sharing what they
know. (That is our general goal too; it just gets overshad-
owed by our apprehensions about professional survival.) In
contrast to the kind of writing we are used to, collabora-
tive writing that receives large amounts of friendly advice
and peer editing is the norm for nonacademic research,
journalism, advertising, and even office memos. The writ-
ing habits of those in educational institutions happen to
be somewhat at odds with those common in nonacademic
settings, and we need the flexibility and objectivity to vali-
date heterogeneous forms of discourse.

6. All discourse generated in a writing class should be public
rather than private.

An insistence on public discourse may also run counter
to common practice in some foreign language teaching.
We tend to give writing assignments that invite personal-
ization and self-disclosure so that students will heighten
their ego investment in their tasks. A healthy segment of
our generation of academics, however, consists of the sen-
titized survivors of the sixties, seventies, and eighties, and
the last thing we want to do is embarrass our students in
public (even if we sometimes joke in private that certain
intractable students almost deserve it). For these reasons
we shield our students from having their writing exposed
to the public forum. A few professors have told me that
they feel strongly about the privacy of the dialogue they
have with their students and would never let anyone else
read their students' papers.

The trouble with our hypersensitivity about privacy is that
students are being asked to write for a single reader.
This familiarity understandably leads to a great deal of
elision in students' prose as they trim away premises and
information that they presume can be taken for granted
because it has already been discussed in class or in the
hall. Sometimes a student is surprised and disgruntled
when the teacher returns a paper with the comment that
"the tone is too personal or informal" or that "too much is
left unstated." What may have happened here is that
the writer and the reader had different implicit audiences
in mind.

Some teachers encourage individual involvement in
student writing and systematically reward disclosure and
personal investment. Now we are talking not about profes-
sional discourse but about confessional texts posing as infor-
mational pieces or literary analysis. Students who are shy
or naturally circumspect or just private people are disadvan-
taged, and those who can feign intimacy on demand are
probably not developing a skill that has much of a future.
When professors ask for students' innermost reflections,
the request at best is intrusive and at worst voyeuristic. If
a text cannot be read in a public forum, it probably should not be required from members of a public forum.

7. A well-developed oral component can enliven the initial exchange of ideas, help define topics, suggest ways of structuring written presentations, concretize second-language lexical resources, and generally serve as the platform for peerwriting activities.

The oral component I advocate for the writing course is, gratifyingly, conversation with a purpose. Many "class discussions" are just idle speculation—or hot air—that students rightfully suspect is subversively meant to get them to use the subjunctive: "What do you think college will be like in the year 2050? Start your sentences with Es posible que ..." Exploratory talks that are honestly targeted at a practical end, like an eventual written statement of a controversial position, should make for more attentive discussion, for brainstorming, for allowing hierarchies of theme to emerge, and for the absorption of key lexical terms before students undertake the first drafts of an assignment. Informal oral exploration of a topic is undoubtedly the best starting point for the creation of a written dialogue (Houpt). Most current composition textbooks, like most foreign language texts on the market, are structured according to grammatical categories or traditional genres of written communication, with no consideration given to what students themselves might want to write or to the different registers they need to practice and will need in the future.

The change from privileging academic writing as a product to be scrutinized in writing as a process that strengthens many aspects of language learning has made "writing across the curriculum" one of the themes of the eighties and nineties. The merger of second-language practice in a variety of genres with the higher-order writing skills appropriate for advanced courses will supply the tools necessary for the critical thinking and expression that we strive to develop in our majors and minors. Many recognized writing specialists who were originally trained to teach literature find that focusing on writing enhances their overall success as teachers of language and literature (Chapman). We all just need a certain detachment from our background in grammar and literature to guide our students better toward fully creative learning through writing.¹

Works Cited


Notes

¹The problems of handling a large volume of student work can be lessened considerably by the use of text-editing programs on personal computers. Elsewhere I describe a model for organizing a writing-intensive foreign language class (either composition or literature) entirely on computer diskettes (Greinier).

²Reliance on the Advanced Placement Examination guidelines for holistic evaluations of a text has been suggested, at least for grading purposes (Magnan; Terry), but these are global performance evaluators, briefly stated on purpose for the benefit of diverse graders facing masses of papers from students all of the same age and scholastic level. These guidelines were never meant to serve as a fine-tuned diagnostic tool to provide feedback for students or teachers, and in any case the AP Exam protocols would barely measure the progress made from semester to semester, let alone from assignment to assignment.

³Examples in the target language may well be required; native speakers and writers of French and Spanish and German do seem to reveal language-specific, or at least national, idiosyncrasies in framing their arguments. "Passing for native," however, is a crucial goal only if you are a spy. Students will inevitably express themselves in their native psychological idiom no matter what the language; an intuitive feel for the rhetorical logic of another culture and language, if it is ever acquired, will be gained late in language contact, by prolonged exposure rather than by formal instruction. That fact, however, certainly does not diminish what the standard accomplish in cultured written discourse on their own terms. On writing styles across cultures, see Krashen 38 and Kaplan. In any case, Krashen reports a marked correlation between strong first-language readers and strong second-language writers.

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