Teaching and Evaluating Writing as a Communicative Skill

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ABSTRACT The writing tasks that we have our students carry out are often nothing more than academic exercises that have little or no communicative content or purpose. It is incumbent upon us to integrate writing as a communicative act into our present use of writing as a support skill for ensuring student preparation of "traditional" homework assignments and for the purpose of evaluation on paper-and-pencil tests. This article presents (1) the purposes of writing in a second-language classroom, (2) types of writing tasks, (3) proficiency levels in writing, (4) content of writing activities, (5) sample writing activities, (6) evaluating writing samples using both holistic and analytical scoring techniques, and (7) a sample evaluation of student writing.

Introduction

Of the four skills that are discussed and (supposedly) taught with equal emphasis in our foreign language classrooms, writing is perhaps the most poorly understood and the skill that is given, in fact, the most cursory attention. Second-language instructors realize that writing plays an important role in second language learning; it is one of the four skills. We also realize that writing is a skill that many have not even mastered in their native language. It is incumbent upon us to keep the importance of all four skills in perspective, particularly if we claim to be teaching a comprehensive second language program. Just because our students present us with written work does not mean that they have learned to write in the second language. Admittedly, having students write their homework, daily assignments and tests is a convenient way to collect samples of student work that are relatively easy to evaluate and correct—correction can be done outside of class at our leisure, student product can be read, reread and compared. Unfortunately many teachers consider such assignments to represent the communicative act of writing.

This paper argues for a different view of writing and discusses how and what we teach in building writing as a communicative skill.

The Purpose of Writing in the Second-Language Classroom.

According to Magnan (10), there are two basic purposes for writing in the second-language classroom: (1) as a support skill (class and homework exercises to practice grammatical forms and structures, vocabulary and spelling) and (2) as a communicative skill (to inform, relate, question, persuade, etc.). The writing tasks we normally ask our students to perform fall predominantly in the realm of writing as a support skill. The practice offered by such writing can be useful in that it enhances the students' appreciation of correct spelling (including diacritical marks), syntax, structures, and vocabulary. These writing tasks do indeed have their place on the continuum of the development of writing skills. They fall within the range of what Rivers (14, p. 4) calls "skill-getting" activities in which students not only acquire basic knowledge but demonstrate this knowledge through extensive drilling using pseudocommunicative activities. Such activities, however, are not ends unto themselves but practice for the development of writing as a true communicative skill, and of the ability to use a correct, well-structured target language as a communicative vehicle for effective self-expression. Activities that we require of our students should encompass the entire continuum of writing purposes, beginning with writing that "is directed in some fashion in the lower
beginning level? High-level writing within a school setting is the primary focus, and the level of proficiency at all levels is intermediate. However, it is important to explore beginning-level students' writing to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their writing.

**Sample Writing Activity**

One functional and realistic task is to correspond in French.

This activity requires students to practice writing in a meaningful context. The students are asked to write letters to each other, discussing their daily lives, interests, and plans. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a practical and engaging way.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 1:**

In this practical task, students write letters to each other about their daily activities and interests. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 2:**

This activity asks students to write a diary entry about their day. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 3:**

This activity asks students to write a story about their life experiences. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a creative and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 4:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a friend about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 5:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a family member about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 6:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a friend about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 7:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a family member about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 8:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a friend about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 9:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a family member about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 10:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a friend about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 11:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a family member about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 12:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a friend about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 13:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a family member about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 14:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a friend about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 15:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a family member about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 16:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a friend about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 17:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a family member about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 18:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a friend about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 19:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a family member about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 20:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a friend about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 21:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a family member about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 22:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a friend about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 23:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a family member about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 24:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a friend about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 25:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a family member about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 26:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a friend about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 27:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a family member about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 28:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a friend about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 29:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a family member about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.

**WRITING ACTIVITY 30:**

This activity asks students to write a letter to a friend about their school life. This activity helps students develop their writing skills in a personal and meaningful context.
and which you have written in French so that your coordinate (brother/sister/parent) can't read it), you must make your last entry for this year. This entry is a summary of the memorable occasions and activities you participated in during 1988. Fill in this page of your diary. (NOTE: It is logical to provide the students with a reproduction of a page from a diary that includes the day and the date. In this manner, the amount of material to be written is limited by the size of the page.)

WRITING ACTIVITY 3: Another very interesting and entertaining activity for testing the functional knowledge of past tense; in this case, the passé composé, is to have students write the story of a fairy tale based on an illustration. In their story, you may limit them to the number of sentences that are required. Should there be need for additional vocabulary, you can provide it, since the focus of this activity is on the correct use of the past tense in a well-known context and not of specific vocabulary.

Un conte de fées. Below is a picture based on a famous story that you certainly recognize. Write six sentences in French to tell what happened in this story. In case you don’t remember the story very well, you might have to make up some parts. That’s fine. Here is some helpful vocabulary:

le loup wolf le lit bed
le forêt forest le grand-mère grandmother
le panier basket tuer to kill
les yeux (m) eyes les dents (f) teeth

[NOTE: Carefully, the object of this activity is to test the accurate and appropriate use of the passé composé in the narration of a series of past actions. For this reason, distortion in the story do not count. As a logical follow-up to this activity, the same illustration may be used later as a prompt for a retelling of the story, this time including both description (l’imparfait) and narration (le passé composé). The idea that a well-known context is the basis for the writing task helps the student see the logical development of ideas in lengthier writing activities.]

WRITING ACTIVITY 4: In evaluating the students’ ability to express themselves in future time, either through the use of the futur proche (aller + infinitive) or the use of the future tense, an interesting activity is that of having students send you a greeting card during Christmas break. For cultural authenticity, it would be more appropriate to have them send a New Year’s card, a fact that you can explain before the activity:

Une carte pour le prof. In order to impress me with the wealth of knowledge you have gained in this class, shortly after the last home for Christmas break, you send me a card...written entirely in French. You include a note telling me what you, your family and your friends are GOING TO DO during vacation. (NOTE: It is again suggested that a real card be copied, for both authenticity and size of the writing space. In this, as in all other activities mentioned, there will often be significantly more language provided by the student than just the specific area being tested. How to cope with errors that appear in other aspects of the writing sample will be addressed in the section entitled “Evaluating Writing Samples”.)

WRITING ACTIVITY 5: The following activity simply sets the tone in which the use of the subjunctive is logical and appropriate. Nonetheless, students are allowed to avoid the subjunctive where possible, thereby indicating not only that they understand when this form of the verb should be used but just how it is used.

Une invitation. You have been invited to a dinner party at a friend’s home next Saturday night. Unluckily, you have already made plans. Since this invitation calls for an R.S.V.P. in writing, you must respond. Send your regrets to the friend who has invited you, and explain why you cannot attend. (NOTE: It is important to provide students with a (fictitious) piece of note paper on which they are to write their R.S.V.P. Not only do you evaluate their handling of the subjunctive, but their socio-linguistic and functional appropriateness of their response in carrying out this task.)
whole text. Since, in holistic scoring, the entire written text is evaluated as a whole, it is important to establish the specific criteria upon which the evaluation is to be based prior to undertaking the evaluation. This does not mean establishing a catalogue of precise individual errors that might appear, but rather deciding what impact the errors that are present have on the overall tone, structure, and comprehensibility of the written sample.

"Holistic evaluation is usually guided by a holistic scoring guide which describes each feature and identifies high, middle, and low quality levels for each feature" (Perkins, 13, p. 55). This scoring guide should be based on the realistic expectations appropriate to the level of the course as stated in the course objectives, the specific course content—grammar, vocabulary, and structure—and the emphasis placed on the various elements of the subject matter of the course, as well as on the different stages of true composition techniques that might have been taught or discussed and practiced.

By spelling out the scoring guide in advance, graders can avoid falling prey to many of the causes of the diversity of judgment among graders or writing samples evaluated by one grader: "1) flavor and personality (rite as the revelation of a personality, individuality, originality, interest, and sincerity); 2) organization and analects; 3) quality of stanza; 4) unit, sentence structure, punctuation, and 5) wording and spelling" (Perkins, 13, p. 654).

Because of the subjectivity inherent in holistic scoring, however, we need to guard against judging the whole text in terms of only one of its aspects (for example, the grammar and spelling). "In grading, as in giving feedback, we should not be attentive to errors in mechanics which overshadow more communicative aspects" (Magnan, 10, p. 138). Compiling the statements made and ideas found, that is an item of the writing sample, is of no use to students the value of their communicative effort and is for more beneficial than the continuous pointing out of red ink to highlight errors.

Example of Holistic Scoring Techniques

An excellent example of holistic scoring is found in the procedures used in evaluating the Advanced Placement Examinations in foreign languages, as suggested by Johnson (7) in a publication from the Educational Testing Service (See Figure 3).

FIGURE 3

SCORING THE ADVANCED PLACEMENT EXAMINATION

Demonstrates Superiority 9 Strong control of the language; proficiency and variety in grammatical use with few significant errors; broad command of vocabulary and of idiomatic French.

Demonstrates Competence 2 Good general control of grammatical structures despite some errors and some awkwardness of style. Good use of idioms and vocabulary. Words smoothly overlaid.

Suggest Competence 6 For ability to express ideas in French: correct use of simple grammatical structures or use of more complex structures without numerous serious errors. Sound apt vocabulary and idioms. Occasional errors of tense and variety of style.

Suggest Incompetence 4 Weak use of language with little control of grammatical structures. Limited vocabulary. Frequent use of ambiguities which distort interpretation on the part of the reader. Occasional confusing features.

Demeonsate In-competence 2 Clearly unacceptable from most points of view. Almost total lack of vocabulary or resources, little or no sense of idiom and/or style. Essentially pidginized English or awful.

Floating Point 1

Source: Johnson (7, p. 19)
most questions, as the style and format of a given type of writing determine the level of proficiency. The writer may be able to write on a topic, but if the format is incorrect, the work may not be considered as 'well written'. This is the case with academic writing, where the structure and presentation of the work are critical.

6. Scoring

Scoring involves the evaluation of the quality of the writing. Scoring is a subjective process, as it involves human judgment. The scorer must be trained to evaluate the work accurately. The scorer must be able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the work.

a. Grammatical accuracy
b. Vocabulary and expression

Scoring is a complex process, as it involves evaluating the quality of the writing. Scoring is a subjective process, as it involves human judgment. The scorer must be trained to evaluate the work accurately. The scorer must be able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the work.

b. Vocabulary and expression

Scoring is a complex process, as it involves evaluating the quality of the writing. Scoring is a subjective process, as it involves human judgment. The scorer must be trained to evaluate the work accurately. The scorer must be able to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the work.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, writing is a complex process that involves the writer, the reader, and the context in which the writing is done. Writing is a way of thinking, as it involves constructing ideas and expressing them through language. Writing is a way of communicating, as it involves sharing ideas and knowledge with others. Writing is a way of learning, as it involves reflecting on one's own experiences and understanding the world around us. Writing is a way of connecting with others, as it involves building relationships and sharing ideas. Writing is a way of creative expression, as it involves using language to create art and entertainment. Writing is a way of engaging with the world, as it involves participating in the ongoing conversation and contributing to our understanding of the world.
The primary purpose of this document is to provide information on the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle and the potential benefits of incorporating certain practices into daily routines.

Nutritional Balance:
The balance of essential nutrients is crucial for maintaining good health. A diet rich in fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and whole grains can help provide the necessary vitamins and minerals for proper body function.

Physical Activity:
Regular physical exercise is vital for cardiovascular health, weight management, and overall well-being. Incorporating activities like walking, jogging, or cycling into daily routines can significantly improve physical fitness.

Mental Health:
Maintaining a positive mental state is essential for overall health. Engaging in activities such as meditation, yoga, or other forms of relaxation can help reduce stress and improve mental clarity.

Sleep:
The quality and duration of sleep are closely linked to overall health. Ensuring adequate sleep and establishing a consistent sleep schedule can help reduce the risk of chronic diseases and improve cognitive function.

In conclusion, prioritizing a healthy lifestyle through balanced nutrition, regular physical activity, mental well-being, and adequate sleep is critical for achieving optimal health and wellness.

References:
- American Heart Association, "Healthy Lifestyle for Life," accessed [Date of Access]
- National Institutes of Health, "Healthy Eating Plate," accessed [Date of Access]
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans," accessed [Date of Access]
Evaluation:

a. Holistic scoring (Advanced Placement). Since this activity comes from the second semester of a beginning-level class, it would be inappropriate to use the AP scoring scale as it is presently written, since it calls for evaluating the used complex structures and "occupational signs of fluency and sense of style".

Nonetheless, we may use the general description provided for the purpose of illustration: Weanni clearly hills from the outset that this sample does not fall in the 1-4 range (incompetent). We can also see that it does not deserve a 9 (superiority) due to the number of errors that appear in the sample—errors in grammar, syntax and vocabulary. Furthermore, this student has not taken advantage of the opportunity to go beyond simply answering the stimulus questions in the letter by adding additional comments or reactions. This student response does not read smoothly. In answering a letter, the correspondent cannot argue that the reader remembers all the questions asked in the original letter. In this particular response, the student has simply answered the questions asked in the order in which they appear, and he makes no effort to remind the writer of exactly which question he is referring to.

We are now confronted with grading this sample somewhere in the rating range of 5-8. This student does demonstrate a certain weakness in vocabulary control. Mes cours sont ennuyeux; j'habite en Connecticut; Je vais être un avocat; nous avons une boîte à bijouteries. On the other hand, he does show that he has a good grasp of the cases of the subjects he is studying. He uses appropriate adjectives (La vie de l'université est agréable; mon prof est francophone et impressionant). As for his control of grammatical elements, he tends to show a functional knowledge of past tense (Je savais la date; J'ai visité l'université de Georgetown). Overall, although he did omit the verbo sublateral at the beginning of the letter. There is slight weakness in adjective agreement: Mes profs sont bons; Mes cours sont ennuyeux, and he confounds the adverb mieux with the adjective meilleur.

b. Holistic scoring (teacher-made criteria). According to the criteria which were specifically created for this test, the student clearly does not fall into the category of 1 or 2. He has willingly added extra comments in his response to the letter. The criteria spoiled out in rating 4 of 4. However, an apparently strict handling of the specific present in the student text: there is limited and inaccurate use of personal substitutes, the style is not smooth, the vocabulary is relatively limited to what is provided in the stimulus text, and additional comments are rather limited. He does show an acceptable and accurate use of most articles. Coherence is often incorrect. There is a preponderance of present tense usage; there are few examples of past