

Some Historical and Academic Considerations for the Teaching of Second Language Writing in English in Mexico¹

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Overview of Writing from a Social Perspective

Writing is closely tied to rhetoric (Henry 2000, Johns 1997 and Silva 1990). The foundation of the development of writing over the course of human social evolution has moved away from writing to communicate, to a process of graphic display memorization. I think that in this process we have actually abandoned the teaching of writing in the second language classroom per se and become servants to a process of training students to adhere to certain predetermined graphic display options. As such, this literature review is very critical and questioning of the research consulted in the field of teaching second language.

Current State of Second Language Writing

Writing instruction in the academy at most institutions, followed the so called Harvard model: students produced demonstration essays or research papers usually on a belletristic topic (because English departments had staked claim to writing instruction in a student's 'general education'), elaborated in the hermetic environment of a classroom, to be submitted to one instructor as the sole arbiter of their worth (Henry 2000, p.IX).

It would be thought that this type of practice would receive some form of modification, but to this day "students continue to produce singly authored display essays... an apt surrogate for a future manager in a high-volume mode of production" (Henry 2000, p. X).

Research Tendencies

In the 1970's composition theory research moved from students' products to their writing processes. This in turn prepared the way for the shift to writing contexts in the 1980's. This has now led to the point where we can focus on agency². (Henry 2000, pp.45-46).

¹ This is a refereed article.

² In this context "agency" refers to the capacity of individual humans to act independently and to make their own free choices.

Current Classroom Practice

One of composition's most endearing traits is its persistent connection to teaching practices. James Berlin's comprehensive history of twentieth-century post-secondary writing instruction in the United States traces the dominance of "current traditional" rhetoric³, which "makes the patterns of arrangement and superficial correctness the main ends of writing instruction" (1987 cited in Henry 2000, pp.1-4). Sharon Crowley extends the critique, noting shortcomings of such instruction in the realms of purpose and audience as well as the narrow range of subject positions offered to writers:

In current-traditional pedagogy students' papers are not constructed as messages that might command assent or rejection. Nor do current-traditional teachers constitute an audience in any rhetorical sense of that word, since they read not to learn or be amused or persuaded, but to weigh and measure a paper's adherence to formal standards. Hence the current-traditional theory of discourse is not a rhetoric but a theory of graphic display, and so it perfectly met the humanist requirement that students' expression of character be put under constant surveillance so they could be "improved" by correction (Composition 96 cited in Henry 2000, pp.2-3).

As a result, composition is conceptualized as: "an endeavour consisting in mastering forms, engaging little disciplinary content knowledge" (Henry 2000, p.4).

Writing in the Second Language Classroom

Traditional writing emerges in the European Enlightenment and is closely related to "scientific positivism" and tends to give language a description of facts and rules that are allocated in a two-dimensional textbook (Johns 1997). This was the driving force in the 1960's and 1970's when applied linguistics focused on research that dealt primarily with count features of language (Bhatia 1993). This focused the teaching of writing on lists of grammatical and lexical 'facts' as they have been discerned through quantitative research (Johns 1997). This coincides with the research of Henry (2000) in that the dominance of the Harvard model in the 1970's moved classroom practice to aspects of teaching forms and

³ **Rhetoric** is the art or technique of persuasion through the use of oral language. Rhetoric is one of the three original liberal arts or *trivium* (the other members are dialectic and grammar) in Western culture. In ancient and medieval times, grammar concerned itself with correct, accurate, pleasing, and effective language use through the study and criticism of literary models, dialectic concerned itself with the testing and invention of new knowledge through a process of question and answer, and rhetoric concerned itself with persuasion in public and political settings such as assemblies and courts of law. As such, rhetoric is said to flourish in open and democratic societies with rights of free speech, free assembly, and political enfranchisement for some portion of the population.

graphic display to students. This was a transfer to a classroom practice that focuses on factual organizational models through imitation (Johns 1997 and Silva 1990). There are minor differences but the general focus is on surface level standard descriptions of formal language.

The core of traditional theories is: "literacy is acquired through direct practice, focused on the production of perfect, formally organized language patterns and discourses" (Johns 1997, p.7).

Good habits are formed by giving a correct response rather than making mistakes" (Richards and Rogers 1986, p.50). What this type of classroom framing does is it leads us to a domain where "the learner is a passive recipient of expert knowledge and direction. Not surprisingly, the role of the teacher is that of expert and authority, the person who directs all student learning....for traditional theories, language and textual forms are central (Johns 1997, p.7).

Introduction to a Social/Classroom Perspective

The teaching of writing has been traditionally based on composition theory that focuses the teaching on the mechanics of the text. This focus has led to a mechanical classroom process that leaves out many aspects of language. The following paper is an attempt to show some academic and historical aspects of writing and how these influence and affect the texts that students here in Mexico may produce in the English language classroom.

First of all, it has to be made clear that speaking and writing are not just different ways of doing the same thing; rather, they are two distinct things (Brookes and Grundy 1998, Byrne 1988, Halliday 1985 and Raimes 1983). "Writing evolves when language has to take on new functions in society. "These tend to be the prestigious functions, those associated with learning, religion, government, and trade" (Halliday, 1985, p. XV). Hence, writing tends to take on an elite or educated appearance within society and becomes the standard by which a society tends to classify the correct use of language (Halliday 1985). However, writing does not represent or incorporate all the features of a language (Halliday 1985). Actually, writing tends to lend itself to conformity and standardization to help create a 'pure' language form that is planned, organized, and legislated by society (Halliday 1985). As writing becomes institutionalised in the form of education it receives more pressure to conform and subsequently lends itself to the creation of recognisable genres within a society (Halliday 1985 and Swales 1990).

The idea that writing is in some way a reflection of a given culture is not strange, "writing evolves in response to needs that arise as a result of cultural

changes" (Halliday 1985, p.39). The relationship between language and culture is immediately accepted in spoken language (Canale 1983). There appears to be no discussion that cultural factors directly influence spoken language (Richard & Schmidt 1983). However, the relationship between written discourse and culture while evident, is at the same time controversial (Jiang 2000). Apparently, there is a tendency to not accept it in written discourse or at least to minimize its influence (Leki 1991 and Swales 1990), especially in technical writing (Ornatowski 1997 and Subbiah 1997). Yet there is much evidence available that establishes the influence of cultural factors in how writing is approached and interpreted by the members of a given discourse community (e.g. Rose & Kasper 2001, Hinkel 1999, Connor 1996, Thrush 1993, Leki 1991, Montañó-Harmon 1991, Jenkins and Hinds 1987, and Kaplan 1967). In fact, from the point of view of the theories of linguistic relativity, literacy, and discourse types and genres, we can assume that "patterns of language and writing are culture specific, the activity of writing is embedded in culture, and writing is task and situation based and results in discourse types" (Connor 1996, p. 9). Yet, when considering the developments of the teaching of second language writing to students a pattern devoid of culture tends to emerge.

The teaching of second language writing can be considered from different points of view. Raimes (1991) in her review of second language writing comments on the beginning of a series of traditions under the following classification: Focus on form (1966) where writing was used to reinforce oral patterns of the language; Focus on the writer (1976) where the ideas of making meaning, invention and multiple drafts led to the process approach; Focus on content (1986) where the demands of the academy are considered and content based instruction emerges; and Focus on the reader (1986) where the expectations of the reader are dominant and English for academic purposes is born. Or, as Silva (1990), in his historical sketch of second language composition, outlines the following categories: Controlled-composition, current-traditional rhetoric, the process approach, and English for academic purposes (must be noted that Silva (1990) does specify that this approach is oriented to creating writers that will conform to the expectations of an American academic institution). These categories are almost identical in concept to those offered by Raimes (1991) and supply a general overview of the major developments in the approaches of teaching second language writing. "There is no doubt that the developments in ESL composition have been influenced by and, to a certain extent, are parallel to developments in teaching of writing to native speakers of English" (Silva 1990, p.11).

These categories all hold some basic concepts in common. Written language is different from spoken language. There is a need to aid second language students in developing their ability to write in English. There are different types of writing events that students need to learn. The latter is clearly evident when considering the assumptions that surround the process approach and English for academic purposes. These categories also hold something much

more important in common, they do not consider the student's native language or culture and the influence they can have on the production of written texts.

This lack of consideration for the student's native language is a strong basis for debate. Most of the aforementioned research comes from studies that center on native English speakers and the results may not have the broad applicability that is claimed (Purves and Purves 1986). Writing is a complex culturally defined activity that is clearly linked to a wider social context within a given society (e.g. Rose & Kasper 2001, Hinkel 1999, Kramsch 1998, Nelson 1997, Abbot 1996, Connor 1996, Ferris 1994, Thrush 1993, Leki 1991, Montaño-Harmon 1991, Jenkins and Hinds 1987, Purves and Purves 1986, Breen 1986, Ong 1982, and Kaplan 1967). This leads to the need to adopt a stance against much of the past as well as current research on second language composition, which is based almost exclusively on American composition theory and language studies (Canagarajah 1999) and shows the need for considering the social context of writing in the classroom (Breen 1986).

Writing cannot be considered a mechanical process that is purely linear and highly predictable (Purves and Purves 1986). Writing needs to be thought of as an activity.

To think of writing as an activity is to allow for change in what is an act or an operation and to allow for modification and rearrangement of those acts and operations in particular contexts. To think of writing as an activity is also to realize that in virtually every instance there is a purposive nature to the act, a planned result, which is a particular text for a particular occasion in a particular cultural context (Purves and Purves 1986, p.175).

Using this type of framework it becomes clear that process cannot be separated from product; and language cannot be divorced from culture. This is due to the fact that a writer brings different types of knowledge based on experience with the world into the activity of writing.

The three basic forms of knowledge requisite for the writer in any culture, or, to put it another way, the three major sets of constraints imposed by a culture upon a writer, include:

- 1) Semantic knowledge which involves knowledge of words and larger units of discourse and what they mean, so that such knowledge continues growing throughout the life of the individual.
- 2) Knowledge of models such as text models and other culturally appropriate formulaic uses of language...
- 3) Knowledge of social and cultural rules governing when it is appropriate to write and when it is obligatory to write as well as knowledge of the appropriate procedures to use in the activity of writing. This knowledge,

which some call pragmatics, includes knowledge of appropriate aims and of what is appropriate to include in certain kinds of writing... (Purves and Purves 1986, pp.178-179).

Therefore, it is possible to sustain the argument that the activity of writing is created and governed by cultural or social constraints. This implies that we need to rethink how a text is viewed.

When considering second language writing and culture, the following elements can be considered: a writer, a text and a reader (Silva 1990). All of these are bound within the framework of a context. When a second language student enters the classroom, she/he brings a different conceptualisation of text and reader with him/her. Simply because of the fact that the individual has moved into a new environment, the context has been modified. This produces the need to have a more ample understanding of all the elements involved in order to create the necessary conditions for the effective learning of writing and the need to study within the context of the non-native speaker's first language (Ferris 1994). To start the process of understanding all the elements involved and how they interact, the focal point will be determining the concept of text.

To consider the definition of a text is no simple matter. Scholars interchange and freely speak of 'spoken and written text' or 'spoken and written discourse'. 'Text' can even be expanded in a broader sense to include all language units with a recognizable communicative function, rather spoken or written (Crystal 1987). For the purpose of this investigation *text* will be defined as "a stretch of written language as the product of an identifiable authorial intention, and its relation to its context of culture as fixed and stable" (Kramsch 1998, p.57). By taking the stance that written language is fixed and stable, and adding the cultural context, it becomes relevant to consider the cultural development of how writing is viewed. As such the historical aspects of the development of writing in Mexico are fundamental for understanding how to teach writing in Mexico.

Written Mexican Spanish

To understand what is considered today to be socially acceptable writing in Mexico, it becomes necessary to turn back to the initial encounter of the Spanish conquistadores/colonizers and the native peoples of the territory now called Mexico in 1521, and the Spanish attempt to Christianise the new-found colony. The contact between Spanish and Náhuatl is perhaps one of the richest sources of interlinguistic influence because of the unique historical factors and the length of Spanish domination of Mexico (Francis and Navarrete Gómez 2003). Regardless, the Spanish conquerors arrived in Mexico with what became a well designed weapon of empire: Language.

In 1492 Antonio de Nebrija published the first grammar of a modern European language, *Gramática de la lengua castellana*. In the preface, he made a statement that turned out to be far more powerful than he could have imagined: "Language has always been the companion of empire" (Nebrija published in 1980, p.97) and the Catholic Church appears to have taken this to heart. This can be inferred by the fact that Luis de Granada the author of *Ecclesiasticae rhetoricae*, material designed specifically from the response of the Council of Trent (1545-63) to revitalise Catholicism then confronted with the Protestant Reform; also attempted to arm the Catholic Church for the New World with another work: *Breve tratado* (Abbott 1996).

The *Breve tratado* is unique in several aspects. First, it is possibly the first written work directed at an unknown audience and takes this situation into account. Second, it clearly establishes that the New World audience has distinct expectations that will in some way differ from those in Europe. Finally, it assumes a universal human rationality (Abbott 1996). Here the Spanish Clergy demonstrates a clear, rational and organized preparation of using rhetoric as a means to persuade distinct audiences. More importantly, it shows a clear insight for the need to accommodate language use for different perceived social needs. However, there is one major flaw in the work,

Granada, like theorists before him, conceives of an audience as an assemblage of people linked to the speaker by nationality and language. Granada shows little concern with the possibility of encountering an audience truly alien to the speaker" (Abbott 1996, p.17).

Nevertheless, Granada opened the door to the most important historical event that offers an understanding of written Mexican Spanish.

The event is the arrival in 1529 of Bernardino de Sahagún to New Spain. Sahagún wrote extensively about his experiences in Mexico, producing texts in Spanish, Latin, and Náhuatl that explored theology, philosophy, history and anthropology (Abbott 1996 and Díaz Cántora 1995).

Sahagún proved to be not only an evangelist but a most accomplished ethnographer as well. He was a serious and sensitive observer of the life of the Mexica people and, more importantly, a thorough and indefatigable recorder of what he observed. Indeed, historians are deeply indebted to Sahagún as an essential source of knowledge about Mexica life prior to and immediately after the conquest. So extraordinary was Sahagún's work, claims Jorge Klor de Alva, that it 'led to the first examples on modern ethnographic fieldwork and narrative, thereby making him the first modern anthropologist' (Abbott 1996, p.24).

One of his fantastic ethnographic accomplishments is of paramount importance to understand the development of contemporary written Mexican Spanish of today.

Sahagún's Book 6 of the *General History* collected in 1547, entitled 'Of the Rhetorical and Moral Philosophy of the Mexican People' contains what Europeans' called rhetoric and the Mexica called Huehuehtlahtolli which variously translates to English as 'ancient word', 'speeches of the ancients' or 'speeches of the elders' (Abbott 1996, Díaz Cántora 1995 and Sahagún 1999). The Huehuehtlahtolli are an accurate collection of the formal speeches that accompanied major events in the lives of the Mexica. Sahagún recognised them as rhetoric and pointed out that they clearly differed thematically, structurally and stylistically from European oratory (Abbott 1996, Díaz Cántora 1995 and Sahagún 1999).

The oratory of the Mexica is typically brief, aphoristic and repetitive. Indeed, the dominant form of the ancient word might be described as constant repetition made palatable by metaphoric variety (Abbott 1996, p.35).

Basically the Huehuehtlahtolli contain many of the characteristics that Walter Ong (1982) refers to as "psycho-dynamics orality". "In particular, Mexica oratory is structurally additive rather than subordinative, stylistically copious and redundant and thematically conservative" (Abbott 1996, p.35). While unfortunately the Huehuehtlahtolli are the last words of the Mexica people, fortunately they lay the foundation to understanding the current structure of written Mexican Spanish.

Because the Huehuehtlahtolli compounded together with Valadés (1996) *Rhetorica Christiana*, illustrate two very different, and often incompatible, conceptions of rhetoric for Europeans that emerged for the new world in the seventeenth century, rhetoric was divided into "two different theories of persuasion – a complete and complex one for the Europeans and another, compressed and simple, for Amerindians" (Abbott 1996, p.112). Valadés makes an attempt to modify European rhetoric for American needs in the *Rhetorica Christiana*. His incorporation of the narration of native life into the framework of

Ciceronian rhetoric demonstrates an awareness and understanding of the peoples around him. Moreover, his elevation of *memoria* and visual imagery, while derived from Renaissance sources, is also a product of his experience among the Mexica (Abbott 1996, p.113).

This concept of Mexica rhetoric was quickly challenged. In 1557 an edict was issued to teach Spanish, Christian doctrine and good manners to the Indians (Zavala 1996). This finally made possible the extension of the post primary schools which taught Latin, poetry, rhetoric, mythology, and ancient history.

Language teaching intensified when Archbishop Rubio Salinas insisted on creating schools (1753) to teach Spanish with the goal of extinguishing the indigenous languages (De la Mora Ochoa 2003, pp.99-101). This was later brought to the level of a requirement by Archbishop Francisco Antonio Lorenzana in 1769, when he made learning Spanish obligatory (Zavala 1996, p.25).

For three centuries Spanish was the dominant language and every possible combination was employed with no success in learning, but only success in ideology that tended to destroy the Indians. The only norm that was taught was ideology, language did not really matter (Barriga Villanueva 2003, p.121).

This 300-year process did not really produce the intended results. The renowned Mexican historian Justo Sierra said in an address on December 16, 1946

...the nationalization of the Spanish language began through persuasion and because of need: much was accomplished, it was a long term project; today it is still not finished, because the governments seem to no longer care and the clergy have become lazy (Zavala 1996, p.27).

This situation continues. The National Seminar on Bilingual and Bicultural Education of 1979 concluded that there was still a long way to go to achieve the goal of teaching Spanish writing. The written language presents difficulties as indigenous languages are too embedded with orality (Barriga Villanueva 2003, pp.119-123). As a result,

Spanish is taught without taking into account diversity, variations, or changes. When Spanish is taught, it is through political will power of domination and assimilation of the indigenous population, protected by a prototype of Spanish created by the current historical intellectual class; with a total submission of the cultured dialect (Barriga Villanueva 2003, p. 123).

In conclusion, Mexico has developed its current national language from a somewhat unusual pattern starting from a native rhetoric dominated by Spanish and leading to an often non-functional national language programme. Nevertheless, two conceptions of Mexican Spanish rhetoric emerge, and this is the starting point when considering where written Mexican Spanish stands today as compared to written American English.

While the internal structure of written English has been extensively studied, written Mexican Spanish has not enjoyed the same treatment. Even though Mexico has one of the largest Spanish speaking populations in the world,

it has only seen two major studies comparing its rhetorical structure to English (Montaño-Harmon 1991). As unusual as this may seem, there is still much insight to gain from what little literature is available in the area of contrastive studies between Spanish and English.

Santiago (1971) and Santana-Seda (1975) produced studies that show the marked differences in the organisation of written discourse in tests written in Puerto Rican Spanish and English. These studies illustrate that compositions in Puerto Rican Spanish contain much higher proportions of coordinate structures, nonsequential sentences, additive constructions, and one- and two-sentence paragraphs.

Montaño-Harmon (1991) conducted what seems to be the only large scale study comparing the internal structure of written Mexican Spanish and English from the perspective of contrastive rhetoric. Montaño-Harmon analysed 25 secondary school textbooks for teaching writing in Mexico. Also, secondary compositions were collected from two school districts in the US and two in Mexico. From a pool of 600 texts, 50 for each language group were used for comparison in a statistical analysis program using ANOVA and t-test procedures⁴. The results open a clear window into Mexico's linguistic history and how it may be influencing current textual structures.

The compositions from the study were analyzed in terms of sentence types, lexical cohesion, syntactic cohesion, and coherence. The majority of the results were similar, but the results that differ clarify a precise image of written Mexican Spanish. First, consider the general information of the texts:

Table 1: Basic information about the texts

Discourse Feature	Means	
	Mexican Spanish	Anglo-American English
length of text	184.86 words	155.70 words
number of sentences	5.38	9.90
average length of sentences	41.10 words	17.10 words

(Montaño-Harmon 1991, p.420)

⁴ Standard tests used in inferential statistic to calculate frequency.

From this point on the findings become even more interesting. The features that are most striking about written Mexican Spanish are: 1) prolific use of run-on sentences, 2) constant reiteration for lexical cohesion, 3) dominance of additive and causal conjunctions and 4) very frequent conscious deviations from the topic (Montaño-Harmon 1991). This is all the more interesting considering that the flexible order possible in a Spanish sentence carries over to the paragraph level (Vásquez-Ayora 1977). This in turn produces longer sentences that cannot be translated into English without breaking them into separate ideas (Vásquez-Ayora, 1977). This is explicitly taught at the secondary school level as shown in the analysis of the textbooks for the Mexican secondary school level. The "textbooks all emphasize effective communication based on eloquence achieved through work in:

- 1) Vocabulary building by using synonyms, antonyms, paraphrasing, and derivations;
- 2) Writing practice focusing on tone, style, and vocabulary based on written models from literary figures;
- 3) Practice in elaborating a given idea in writing in various ways as one attempts to develop the theme in greater depth;
- 4) Work on correct grammar and mechanics at the sentence level

(Montaño-Harmon 1991, p.418).

This is further developed in the family structure where children are taught to play with formal and ornate language as part of their social skills. Also, children learn to play with the flexibility of language, where meanings are hidden between lines, in repetitions for emphasis, and in pauses (Riding 1986). According to Riding "in these endless linguistic contortions, the Mexican's fascination with detail and obsession with nuance are constantly satisfied" (1986, p. 19). All of these elements were present in the texts written by the Mexican students in the research carried out by Montaño-Harmon. This led to the conclusion that native Mexican Spanish speakers do not perform well in written evaluations in English in the United States because of the application of a criteria that imposes a linear, deductive discourse pattern deemed logical and organized in American English (Montaño-Harmon 1991). The above suggests the possibility that the concept of rhetoric is the social basis for the creation of text by a given community and that it varies from community to community (Haller 2000, pp.375-381). This in turn creates the need to see writing as a community project that originates from its cultural roots. To show an example of this community project over time, consider this example of the development from Náhuatl to Spanish, with an English translation provided at the end. On the following page is a verse from the Huehuehtlahtolli. Notice how the sentences have been constructed and the use of punctuation.

Maca huelic cochiztli xicchiuhto; xizatehua, ximocuitihuetzi in yohuallixelihui; momolicpi, motetepon ic xitlacza, ximeuhtiquiza, motolol momalcoch xicchihua, xicnotza, xictzatzili in tlacatl in totecuyo, in yehuatzin in Yohualli in Ehecatl, ca maahuiltitzinoa in yohualtica mitzcaquiz; auh uncan mitzicnoittaz, uncan mitzmacaz in tlein molhuil momacehual (Díaz Cántora 1995, p. 37 original Náhuatl verse).

No le tomes sabor al sueño; despierta, incorpórate, levántate de pronto a la media noche, ve postrada sobre los codos y las rodillas, luego párate, haz tu inclinación y reverencia, invoca, **llama a voces al señor, nuestro señor, al que es Noche y Viento, pues él gusta de oírte por la noche; entonces tendrá piedad de ti, entonces te dará lo que mereces** (Díaz Cántora 1995, p. 43, His translation to Spanish of the same verse).

Do not fall in love with sleeping; awake, gather yourself, arise in the middle of the night. Go humble on elbows and knees, then stand up, incline yourself and honor. **Call in voices to the lord, our lord, He who is Night and Wind. He likes to hear you at night. He will have mercy on you. He will give you what you deserve.** (My translation of the Spanish verse)

In Náhuatl the original author of the book that was consulted added the punctuation. However, it can be seen from the Náhuatl to the Spanish translation the author made changes in the structuring of the sentences. In the translation from Spanish to English there were additional changes; most notably the last three lines of the text that I have highlighted for emphasis.

Considering that written Mexican Spanish is based on Náhuatl rhetoric and that extremely long sentences of this type are still common in current Mexican Spanish writing, it becomes apparent the added difficulties a Mexican Spanish speaker could have when learning to write in American English.

Implications

From these different components that are present in the target population of students learning to write in English as a second language in Mexico, some strong implications can be drawn. Clearly, the element of culture plays a major role in the process of writing and the cultural aspects rely heavily on a series of social elements that are related to the social structure of a given group. Many of the complications that Mexican students face when learning to write in English come from differences in how people learn to write in Mexico vs. how people learn to write in the United States.

As second language teachers, we need to rethink how we approach the process of teaching the activity of writing in the classroom. We need to give more consideration to the relationship between language and culture in written texts. Finally, we need to give more consideration to our students' mother tongue and the role it plays in using written language from the point of view of rhetoric.

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