



Student and Instructor Beliefs About Spanish Second Language Writing Assignments: A Web-Based Survey Study

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Introduction

- Most university-level second language (L2) learners are enrolled in basic language program (BLP) courses (Looney & Lusin, 2018)
- One common component of such courses is the use of L2 writing assignments (Cimask & Reichelt, 2011)
 - Typically a form-focused approach designed to elicit specific grammar points (Hubert, 2014; O'Donnell, 2007; Reichelt et al., 2012)
- However, the implementation can vary greatly
 - For example, when learning imperfect aspect of the past tense, students often write about their childhood to elicit verb conjugations
 - Nonetheless, there are limitless variations in logistical aspects, such as assignment length, whether it is in-class or homework, and so on

Introduction

- Also, more broadly, does this form-focused approach fit with today's more meaning-oriented L2 classroom?
 - Such assignments could be a tool to help develop broad L2 abilities
 - Other pedagogical questions possibly at play include the need for non-language-specific writing skills, an obligation to move beyond the use of personal information only, the inclusion of culture, and so on
- Given the wide-ranging variation of L2 writing assignments, there is a need to better understand the best practices for the BLP classroom

Beliefs and Perceptions About L2 Learning

- L2 learners' beliefs and perceptions about language and language learning have a bearing on how they approach the complex task of acquiring their L2 more broadly (e.g., Dörnyei, 2005; Riley, 1997; Yang, 1999)
 - This includes how they interact with various aspects of their L2 classroom, including L2 writing assignments
- Definitions abound in the literature (Barcelos, 2003; Borg, 2003), but the present study conceptualizes beliefs as:
 - A set of perceptions, ideas, and opinions about L2 learning that influence how...
 - Instructors understand themselves in that role, how they think about student learning, and how classroom practices influence learning
 - Learners perceive, think about, and understand classroom practices, their role in the classroom, instructor behaviors, and the target language and culture

Beliefs and Perceptions About L2 Learning

- Understanding how student and instructor beliefs align or diverge is beneficial, as it can:
 - Prevent poor engagement with classroom materials and/or low student motivation
 - Promote a more student-centered classroom
- Foundational research on student and instructor beliefs (Horwitz, 1988, 1999) shows that these two groups agree on some specific areas regarding L2 learning:
 - Certain languages are more difficult to learn
 - Some people have an aptitude for languages
 - Grammar and vocabulary are the most important aspects of L2 learning

Beliefs and Perceptions About L2 Learning

- But they also disagree:
 - Explicit grammar teaching is essential to students (Brown, 2009; Jean & Simard, 2011; Polat, 2009; Schulz, 1996, 2001), whereas instructors indicate a preference for communication and meaning (Brown, 2009; Schulz, 1996, 2001)
 - Students view error correction favorably in most contexts, instructors' views are more nuanced (Brown, 2009; Schulz, 1996, 2001)
- It is essential for the curriculum designers to know that whatever choice is made regarding certain aspects, they will have a distinct impression on students and instructors
 - Given that writing assignments conventionally incorporate both grammar and corrective feedback, for example, this type of L2 task is ideal for further examination regarding student and instructor beliefs

L2 Writing in University Programs

- Research focusing on advanced levels of Spanish (Menke & Anderson, 2019):
 - Students highly value feedback from instructors
 - They feel that despite the inclusion of graded writing assignments in their courses, there was a lack of writing instruction at the upper levels
 - Their opinions were polarized regarding the utility of the peer review process
- There is limited empirical research on writing outcomes in lower-level courses and a lack of consensus regarding the purpose of writing in this curriculum (e.g., Hubert & Bonzo, 2010; O'Donnell, 2007; Reichelt, 2001; Reichelt et al., 2012)
 - Unclear how L2 learners at lower levels, such as in BLPs, perceive L2 writing assignments

Motivation and Research Questions

Goal: To better understand how students and instructors view L2 writing assignments in coordinated BLPs, in order to lay a foundation upon which recommendations can be made for the development of L2 writing tasks that promote deeper student engagement

Research Question: Do BLP students and instructors align in their beliefs about L2 writing?

- **Sub-Question 1:** Do they show similar levels of agreement in their beliefs about L2 writing?
- **Sub-Question 2:** Do they show similar preferences in their ranking of importance of specific components of the L2 writing curriculum?

Spanish Basic Language Program 1: UA

- **The University of Alabama**
 - 53 sections
 - 880 students
 - 21 instructors
 - Year 1: SP 101, SP 102
 - MWF 50-minute (4 credits)
 - Year 2: SP 201, SP 202
 - MWF 50-minute (3 credits)
 - TR 75-minute (3 credits)



Spanish Basic Language Program 2: UTK

- **University of Tennessee, Knoxville**
 - 74 sections
 - 1790 students
 - 39 instructors
 - Year 1: SP 111, SP 150, SP 123
 - MWF 50-minute (3 credits)
 - MW(F) 110-minute (6 credits; Hybrid)
 - Year 2: SP 211, SP 212, 223
 - MWF 50-minute (3 credits)
 - MWF 110-minute (6 credits)

Spanish Basic Language Program 3: NIU

- **Northern Illinois University**
 - 27 sections
 - 581 students
 - 11 instructors
 - Year 1 & 2: SP 101, SP 102, SP 201, SP 202
 - MWF 50-minute (3 credits)
 - TR 75-minute (3 credits)
 - Fully online



Participants

- Emails sent to all Spanish BLP students and instructors
 - Completely anonymous and no compensation
- Dataset includes 183 student responses and 28 instructor responses
 - 8 students and 2 instructors removed from the dataset for not completing all questions used in the analysis

University	Student Respondents	Instructor Respondents
UA	70	13
UTK	55	9
NIU	58	6

Materials

- Online survey via Qualtrics (10-20 minutes)
 - Asked to respond with their “personal opinions about and/or experience with writing assignments for basic and intermediate level Spanish courses”
- Statements targeting:
 - **Why** should L2 writing assessments be assigned? ($n = 6$)
 - **What** kind of L2 writing assessments should be assigned? ($n = 6$)
 - **How** should L2 writing assessments be assigned? ($n = 8$)
- Two different response types for each:
 - 7-point Likert scale for each individual statement (1 = *strongly disagree*)
 - Ranking question for each of the three categories (1 = *most important*)

Analysis

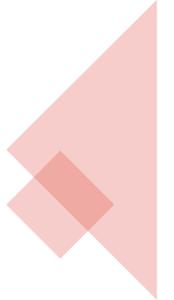
- To assess whether BLP students and instructors showed similar levels of agreement in their beliefs about L2 writing, there were two analyses based on the type of response
 - **Agreement data:** The mean Likert ratings for each statement were calculated by group
 - **Ranking data:** The mean ranking for each statement within its respective category calculated by group
- Separate two-way ANOVAs conducted for each type of data

Results Part 1: Agreement Data

- Descriptively, instructors and students showed broad agreement in their beliefs about L2 writing assignments
- There was a statistically significant interaction between the effects of statement and group, $F(19, 4180) = 2.350, p = .001$
- Post hoc analysis revealed that there were seven statements where the groups differed ($p < .05$) significantly from one another
 - The remaining thirteen statements (i.e., 65%) showed no significant difference between groups

STATEMENT	INS	STU	DIF
It is a good idea to receive feedback on drafts of writing assignments from your classmates.	4.5	4.5	0.08
It is a good idea to cater writing assignments to students as language learners (e.g., specific grammar knowledge and/or needs).	5.9	5.8	0.10
Writing assignments should have students demonstrate understanding/knowledge of a specific topic (e.g., cultural aspects).	5.6	5.4	0.16
It is better to complete many shorter writing assignments throughout the semester.	5.6	5.8	0.17
It is a good idea to receive feedback on drafts of writing assignments from your instructor.	6.3	6.5	0.22
Writing assignments should help students improve Spanish-specific writing skills (e.g., spelling, accent marks).	6.3	6.1	0.22
It is a good idea to use class time to explicitly prepare for writing assignments.	5.7	5.4	0.26
It is a good idea to use class time to follow up on writing assignments.	5.9	5.7	0.28
Writing assignments should assist students in reviewing and practicing specific grammar structures and/or vocabulary recently taught in class.	6.6	6.4	0.29
Writing assignments should include a focus on cultural aspects of the Spanish-speaking world.	5.4	5.1	0.30
Writing assignments should include the use of imagination/creativity.	6.0	5.6	0.39
Writing assignments should challenge students to improve their mastery of specific grammar structures and/or vocabulary.	6.5	6.0	0.51
It is better to complete one or two longer writing assignments during the semester.	3.8	3.3	0.55
It is a good idea to cater writing assignments to students as individuals (e.g., personalities, backgrounds, interests).	5.8	5.2	0.60
Writing assignments should help student improve general writing skills, regardless of language (e.g., organization, argumentation, writing style).	6.0	5.4	0.67
Writing assignments should include the use of personal information (e.g., writing about personal experiences).	6.0	5.3	0.70
Writing assignments should include the use of outside resources/research.	4.9	4.1	0.71
Writing assignments should include writing for specific purposes (e.g., opinion, description, request).	6.3	5.4	0.84
Writing assignments should help students improve their general Spanish language abilities, without focusing on specific grammar structures and/or vocabulary.	4.6	5.5	0.85
Writing assignments should include a variety of written products (e.g., blogs, brochure, essays, reports).	5.6	4.5	1.11

Agreement Data Differences: Why Category



- Students agreed more strongly than instructors for the statement:
 - *(i) Writing assignments should help students improve their general language abilities, without focusing on specific grammar structures and/or vocabulary*
- Instructors agreed more strongly than students for the statement:
 - *(ii) Writing assignments should help students improve general writing skills, regardless of language (e.g., organization, argumentation, writing style)*

	Instructor M (SD)	Student M (SD)
i	4.6 (2.0)	5.5 (1.5)
ii	6.0 (1.3)	5.4 (1.5)

Agreement Data Differences: What Category



- Instructors agreed more strongly than students for the statements:
 - *(i) Writing assignments should include the use of outside resources/research*
 - *(ii) Writing assignments should include the use of personal information (e.g., writing about personal experiences)*
 - *(iii) Writing assignments should include a variety of written products (e.g., blogs, brochures, essays, reports)*
 - *(iv) Writing assignments should include writing for specific purposes (e.g., opinion, description, request)*

	Instructor M (SD)	Student M (SD)
i	4.9 (1.7)	4.1 (1.9)
ii	6.0 (1.1)	5.3 (1.4)
iii	5.6 (1.5)	4.5 (1.8)
iv	6.3 (1.0)	5.4 (1.3)

Agreement Data Differences: How Category



- Instructors agreed more strongly than students for the statement:
 - (i) *It is a good idea to cater writing assignments to students as individuals (e.g., personalities, backgrounds, interests)*

	Instructor M (SD)	Student M (SD)
i	5.8 (1.4)	5.2 (1.5)

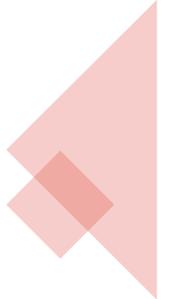


Results Part 2: Ranking Data

- Descriptively, ranking data show that instructors and students generally ranked items similarly
- However, there was a statistically significant interaction between the effects of statement and group, $F(19, 4180) = 14.719, p < .001$
- Post hoc analysis revealed that there were four statements that differed significantly between the groups ($p < .05$)
 - The remaining sixteen statements (i.e., 80%) showed no difference
 - No significant differences at all were found in the *what* category for the ranking data between instructors and students

STATEMENT	INS	STU	DIF
Assist students in reviewing and practicing specific grammar structures and/or vocabulary recently taught in class	1.7	2.3	0.59
Challenge students to improve their mastery of specific grammar structures and/or vocabulary	2.8	3.2	0.42
Help student improve general writing skills, regardless of language (e.g., organization, argumentation, writing style)	4.8	4.9	0.18
Help students improve Spanish-specific writing skills (e.g., spelling, accent marks)	4.1	3.6	0.53
Help students improve their general Spanish language abilities, without focusing on specific grammar structures and/or vocabulary	3.9	2.9	0.98
Have students demonstrate understanding/knowledge of a specific topic (e.g., cultural aspects)	3.8	4.1	0.33
Use of personal information (e.g., writing about personal experiences)	2.7	3.3	0.56
Use of imagination/creativity	2.8	2.6	0.24
Writing for specific purposes (e.g., opinion, description, request)	3.1	3.3	0.21
Focus on cultural aspects of the Spanish-speaking world	3.8	3.3	0.51
Variety of written products (e.g., blogs, brochure, essays, reports)	3.8	4.2	0.38
Need for outside resources/research	4.8	4.4	0.41
Completing many shorter writing assignments	3.0	2.4	0.64
Relevance of assignment to students as language learners (e.g., specific grammar knowledge and/or needs)	3.4	4.9	1.43
Relevance of assignment to students as individuals (e.g., personalities, background, interests)	3.9	6.0	2.09
Receiving feedback on drafts of writing assignments from your instructor	4.1	3.2	0.94
In-class time spent explicitly preparing for writing assignments	4.3	3.7	0.59
In-class time spent following up on writing assignments	4.6	4.2	0.42
Completing one or two longer writing assignments	6.1	5.6	0.47
Receiving feedback on drafts of writing assignments from your classmates	6.5	6.0	0.46

Ranking Data Differences: Why Category



- Recall that the numbers are inverted here, as a lower number indicates a higher ranking
- Students ranked the following statement higher than instructors:
 - *(i) Writing assignments should help students improve their general Spanish language abilities, without focusing on specific grammar structures and/or vocabulary*

	Instructor M (SD)	Student M (SD)
i	3.9 (1.6)	2.9 (1.6)



Ranking Data Differences: How Category



- Students ranked the following statement higher than instructors:
 - *(i) It is a good idea to receive feedback on drafts of writing assignments from your instructor*

- Instructors ranked the following statements higher than students:
 - *(ii) It is a good idea to cater writing assignments to students as language learners (e.g., specific grammar knowledge and/or needs).*
 - *(iii) It is a good idea to cater writing assignments to students as individuals (e.g., personalities, backgrounds, interests)*

	Instructor M (SD)	Student M (SD)
i	4.1 (1.6)	3.2 (1.6)
ii	3.4 (2.2)	4.9 (1.9)
iii	3.9 (2.4)	6.0 (2.0)

Discussion

- Overall, the results suggest general agreement among students and instructors in our sample
- In particular, both groups believe strongly that targeting specific grammar structures and/or vocabulary is crucial to L2 writing assignments
 - Suggests that even in the modern L2 classroom, where the design of writing assignments may be more meaning-focused, students may still have a desire to focus on form during the writing process, and instructors may prefer to focus on form as they evaluate student work

Discussion

- Although broad agreement was found, there are specific differences between the two groups' opinions about writing assignments and their perceived utility in the L2 classroom
- For example, students agreed more strongly with the idea that such tasks should serve as a general tool for linguistic development
 - Even if both parties assume a form-focused (i.e., writing-to-learn) approach, the scope of what should be learned can vary
 - Students are not solely interested in a form-specific approach, but see writing assignments also as a chance to more holistically hone their abilities

Discussion

- Majority of significant differences between the two groups were related to *what* L2 writing assignments should comprise (i.e., task design)
- Instructors favor assignments that incorporate: (a) outside resources, (b) personal information, (c) various types of written products, and (d) writing for specific purposes
 - Aligns more with a learning-to-write model
- Students are less inclined to believe such development should be an essential goal of L2 writing assignments in BLPs
 - Students ranked these aspects as less important than other components of L2 writing assignments, such as creativity

Discussion

- Most differences are a result of instructors believing that writing assignments should serve a wide variety of pedagogical purposes
 - Lofty aspirations for what they can and should be doing for students
 - A tool for general linguistic development, a way to practice targeted grammatical structures, a way to tap into student interests, a motivation tool, an outlet for creativity, and so on
- Perhaps it is unrealistic to expect L2 writing assignments to carry such a heavy burden
 - Especially since student data did not reveal the same belief that they should be so ambitious in scope

Pedagogical Implications

- BLPs should engage in broader dialogue about the practical utility of various types of L2 writing assignments in both instructor training and in the classroom
 - Especially true for an integrated approach to L2 writing assignments (e.g., using writing as a measure of presentational or interpersonal language skills)
- BLPs should seize the opportunity to engage with overall linguistic development in L2 writing assignments (even if it is harder or more time consuming to assess)
 - Students are in favor of such an approach
- BLPs should prioritize uncovering areas of divergence
 - Allows instructors to explicitly discuss with students the rationale for curricular decisions that may seem counterintuitive based on their own beliefs

Conclusions

- Despite some disagreement, overall there is a lot that students and instructors agree about when it comes to L2 writing assignments in coordinated BLPs
- We advocate for surveying students in coordinated BLPs often and with multiple question types (agreement and ranking) in order to get a more holistic picture of their understanding of the curriculum
- Such an approach can help BLPs to better understand student beliefs about curricular decisions and thus work with students to increase investment and engagement with the course materials

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