



The Speaking-Writing Connection: Integrating Dialogue into a Foreign Language Writing Course

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Abstract

Second language writing researchers have demonstrated that the integration of dialogue into ESL writing classrooms can have positive effects on certain aspects of composition instruction, namely in the planning and revision stages. However, the relationship between a highly social classroom and the eventual written product produced by L2 learners is not yet clear. This study attempts to measure the effects of such a classroom on the writing produced by 43 U.S. university foreign language students enrolled in a multi-section intermediate Spanish grammar and writing course. Pre- and post-treatment writing samples were collected from experimental and control groups and samples were analyzed in terms of overall communicative effectiveness and writing structure, and well as overall comprehensibility. Results indicate no statistically-significant difference between experimental and control groups; talking about writing and talking while writing did not appear to have measurable effects on these students' writing quality.

1 Introduction

The role of spoken interaction within the second language (L2) writing classroom is a topic of growing interest among L2 writing researchers. As our understanding of the nature of both first language (L1) and L2 writing has started to shift away from a completely individualistic perception of this activity towards a view more balanced between cognitivist and sociocultural perspectives, researchers are beginning to perceive the need for increased social interaction between L2 writing students. Atkinson (2003) has claimed that process theory of writing, the dominant theoretical approach informing the teaching of L2 writing since the 1960s, has led teachers and researchers to consider the act of writing in a purely individualistic sense, as process theory is, in his words, “resolutely asocial in any theoretical sense” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 7). He then calls for the development of a theory of L2 writing as a socially-situated activity instead of a process of “involute individuality” and “lonely, autonomous cognition” (Atkinson, 2003, p. 6). Weissberg (2006) also calls for a similar reevaluation of this theory, claiming that social interaction provides an ideal context for mastering complex cognitive skills like writing and that these two activities should no longer be approached so separately. In this “Post-process” era of L2 writing (Atkinson 2003), quality writing requires both cognitive and social skills. Weissberg (2006) has specifically called for the increased integration of dialogue in the L2 writing classroom. Despite the fact that the English as a second language (ESL) writing classroom has traditionally been a place of individual work overseen by an “expert” writing instructor, Weissberg (2006) claims that writing is a “fun-

damentally social phenomenon” best acquired by L2 learners when it is firmly embedded in a classroom environment of social interaction.

Despite this growing interest, the field of academic study seeking to understand writing by looking at oral language (termed *cross-modality* research by Weissberg, 2005) continues to suffer from a series of theoretical and methodological shortcomings which hamper our understanding of the relationship between the development of speech and writing proficiencies. One of the most important of these shortcomings is the fact that researchers are still not sure if spoken interaction in the L2 writing classroom is relevant to L2 written products and processes. In other words, we are not sure if a highly social L2 writing classroom environment actually has any effect on the quality of student writing (Weissberg, 2005). Another of these shortcomings is the fact that virtually all cross-modality research has been conducted with ESL students (i.e. Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Weissberg, 1994, 2000, 2006); foreign language (FL) writers have been largely ignored up to this point. Just as in ESL curricula, the majority of university FL majors require students to complete at least one intermediate/advanced-level composition course. This course, usually bundled together with explicit grammatical instruction under the title of *grammar and writing*, is often taught following an individualistic, instructor-fronted approach in which students complete their composing and other writing assignments outside of class, leaving the bulk of class time to devote to the explicit instruction of grammar.

The study presented here is an attempt to add empirical evidence to our understanding of the effects of dialogue on student writing in the L2 writing classroom. We specifically investigate whether or not the integration of a significant amount of dialogue into the curriculum of a university-level intermediate Spanish as a FL grammar and writing course will affect the quality of these students’ writing on two different measures of proficiency: (1) writing structure and (2) overall comprehensibility. This approach was chosen in an effort to take up the charge given by Reichelt (2001) in her review of the effects of grammar treatment on FL writing learners’ writing abilities: to investigate the overall communicative successfulness of the writing produced by these students, in addition to the accuracy of their grammar. The research questions which guide this study are:

1. Does the integration of peer dialogue into an intermediate Spanish grammar and writing course lead students to produce more effective writing?
2. Does shifting the instructional focus of an intermediate Spanish grammar and writing course away from explicit grammatical instruction hurt students’ ability to produce accurate, comprehensible writing?

Our working hypothesis is that the integration of a significant social component into a FL (Spanish) grammar and writing course will lead students to produce better quality writing in terms of overall communicative effectiveness, but may hurt their ability to produce accurate grammar in their writing, due to the fact that the instructional focus of the course is diverted away from an explicit focus on grammar. Communicative effectiveness is defined here in terms of overall comprehensibility and of the overall sophistication with which student writers organized and structured their compositions. Our working hypothesis is based on the assumption that the provision of an immediate and ongoing audience will push students to make their writing more comprehensible to their reader, as well as provide them with a more authentic reason to write in the form of a peer to assist in both text creation and revision.

2 Review of the literature

2.1 *Speaking in writing instruction*

Many teachers and researchers have argued that dialogue is a critical component in the efficacy of classroom language instruction (i.e. Cazden, 1988; Heath, 1983; Weissberg, 1994). Weissberg (1994) has further asserted that the most effective lessons are those in which classroom discourse fits the learning tasks posed by the subject matter, and that nowhere is this fit more critical than in

skill-based courses such as an ESL writing course. Manglesdorf (1989), Blanton (1992), and Weissberg (1994) have claimed that classroom dialogue may enhance learners' use of the composition process for cognitive growth, raising their awareness of the cognitive processes involved in producing written text. They further claim that mixing speaking and writing within the same instructional space helps language learners to gain more conscious control over their own writing processes, strengthening the "executive monitor" that L1 writing researchers Flower and Hayes (1981) have asserted is central to the composing process. Weissberg (1998, 2005) has also argued that certain forms of writing, namely journal writing, should be considered *written conversation* (Weissberg 2005, p. 95), and that peer dialogue which directly relates to the composing process provides L2 writers with additional opportunities to engage in language learning which are directly applicable to learning how to write. Additionally, proponents of the Whole Language movement (i.e. Freeman & Freeman, 1992) have claimed that composition instruction can be enhanced by the introduction of dialogue into such courses, as the acquisition of writing skills is facilitated by allowing learners to utilize their acquired oral language to assist them in their writing.

Weissberg (2006) has identified three different routes that ESL learners have been observed to take on the road to English-language literacy. First, those learners who are perhaps more outgoing, sociable people and/or have limited experience in writing in their L1 follow a route in which their speaking proficiency develops at a faster rate than their writing proficiency. These learners attempt to "talk their way" through early writing attempts, which come to be characterized by the same chatty, conversational features produced in the learners' oral language production. The second route is taken by those learners who may have more training and/or experience in writing in their L1, and/or who are perhaps shy or otherwise unable/unwilling to speak up in the TL. The writing produced by this type of learner tends to develop at a faster rate than their speaking proficiency. In many cases, these learners' TL writing proficiency continues to improve, but their speaking proficiency does not. The third route to L2 literacy is described by Weissberg (2006) as "a case of symmetrical development" (p. 37-39). Where the other routes involve the development of one of these skills at a (much) higher level than the other, in one case speaking pushing writing forward along with it, and in the other writing developing in the absence of speaking improvement, this route sees speaking and writing develop at similar rates. Weissberg (2006) is also quick to point out that this third route to literacy is the rarest of the three. The majority of observed students were stronger in one aspect of their TL development than the other. Weissberg (2006) takes this opportunity to call for a change in the way ESL writing is taught. He urges L2 writing instructors to present spoken and written language together in the L2 writing classroom in more balanced way, this practice theoretically allowing each individual learner's strength in one modality to support their development in the other weaker area.

At the present time only a small amount of descriptive and (quasi) empirical research evidence is available to describe the relationship that may exist between speech and writing in adult L2 learners. One such observational study was carried out by Cumming (1992), who set out to identify and describe the most common instructional routines used by experienced ESL composition instructors. One of these six routines, dubbed *Collectively Constructing Interpretations* by Cummings (1992) saw L2 writing instructors directing whole-class discussions for the purpose of creating a formal outline for a composition, an interpretation of a reading, or a particular linguistic or rhetorical paradigm. Cummings (1992) observed that these activities in turn promoted interactive and responsive dialogue among class participants. The opportunity to share their insights with their classmates appeared to provide students with clearer, more relevant ideas and/or rhetorical processes.

Another cross-modality study of adult L2 learners was carried out by Weissberg (2000). This case study of 5 native Spanish-speaking adult ESL students set out to describe the appearance of new morphosyntactic features in the writing and speech of this type of learner. The author conducted a series of student interviews and classroom observations, administered written questionnaires, and administered a large number of oral and written language production tasks over the

course of a three and a half month semester. Results indicated that these 5 learners “showed a clear preference for writing over speech as the primary modality for morphosyntactic development” (Weissberg, 2000, p. 51). However, these results also indicated that although student-teacher and student-student dialogue may lead students to generate ideas and/or improve student ability to revise and edit their own texts, using speech for composition instruction did not appear to lead to improvements in learner grammatical accuracy or overall grammatical sophistication.

2.2 U.S. university foreign language writing

Reichelt (1999) has suggested that FL learners lack truly extrinsic motivation when it comes engaging in FL composing. Although university FL course writing assignments may provide a certain measure of extrinsic motivation, these same assignments are frequently given when there is no clear audience or purpose for writing outside the FL classroom (Reichelt, 1999, p. 195). Not only do FL students themselves have trouble seeing this purpose and audience, but their instructors may also find it difficult to assign writing assignments which also allow them to meet both their communicative and grammatical course goals. Where the reasons for learning to produce quality writing are generally very clear for other types of language learners (i.e. L1 learners, and those studying ESL or EFL), such is not the case for many U.S. university students studying a FL other than English. FL instructors and students alike may have a difficult time justifying the effort required to produce high quality communicative FL writing in light of the fact that their future professional endeavors are unlikely to require the use of academic/professional writing in a language other than English. This lack of purpose and focus may be further hampering efforts to produce quality FL writing within this type of language learning environment. We therefore theorize that providing FL learners with an immediate audience in the form of a peer with whom they work directly to plan and compose their written drafts may help to provide a more *immediate* purpose for FL writing other than a nebulous, uncertain need “far” in the future. In-class peer collaboration on writing projects may indeed help FL writers to develop a sense of audience, the immediacy of this need may help to fill this important gap in FL writing, that of lack of clear purpose for FL writing.

3 Methodology

3.1 Participants

The participants in this study were 43 U.S. university students enrolled in two intact sections of an intermediate-level Spanish-language grammar and writing course at a mid-sized university in the western U.S. The first course section (n=21) served as the experimental group, and the second (n=22) served as the control group. All subjects were native speakers of English. All had similar previous academic experience with the Spanish language, having completed similar university coursework previous to their enrollment in the present grammar and writing course. The original demographic makeup of the course itself also included a small number of heritage Spanish speakers, but data from these learners is not included in the present study.

3.2 Grammar and writing course goals and design

The course in which the present subjects were enrolled was designed to teach both Spanish grammar and writing at an intermediate level. An advanced-level textbook was employed to provide a comprehensive review of Spanish grammar, as well as intermediate/advanced-level readings and writing prompts. Students received direct grammar instruction in class (much more time was devoted to grammar in the control group class; see next section for details) and were later tested on their memorization and application of these points of grammar via in-class quizzes and formal

midterm and final exams. Students were also required to complete three writing assignments for this course. These tasks were designed to encourage learners to make use of recently-presented and practiced grammatical structures to complete the writing tasks. All writing assignments were carried out using a multi-draft system in which students were required to edit, revise, and (hopefully) improve their drafts.

3.3 *Study procedure*

The first course section was taught by a near-native speaker of Spanish (native speaker of English, author of the present study) with 5 years of experience teaching university-level Spanish language courses. The second course section was taught by a native speaker of Spanish with three semesters' experience teaching this writing course. Every effort was made to standardize the curriculum across these two sections, except for the facet of writing instruction under investigation. Both course sections were taught using the textbook *Repase y escribe* (5th edition; full citation in references) to review the same set of elements of Spanish grammar of known difficulty for native English-speaking learners. These elements were presented following an identical syllabus schedule, and the two sections gave an identical midterm exam, along with a very similar final exam (additional details on this final exam can be found in the following section). The same writing prompts were used in both sections, compositions due dates were the same, and final course grades were assigned using an identical grading rubric.

The manner in which the experimental and control group instructors interacted with their students differs in two important ways. First, the control group devoted significantly more class time to the explicit presentation and practice of grammar. The experimental group did devote a great deal of time to this same type of grammatical instruction, but also allotted a significant amount of class time for students to work together and carry out on-task dialogues related to their writing assignments. Second, students in the control group received what can be described as a very traditional, widely-implemented approach to teaching FL writing: a two-draft system of composition in which written drafts are first completed outside of class (saving valuable in-class time for other, more important pursuits) and then turned in to the instructor for both an intermediate grade and to receive expert instructor feedback. Once the instructor has provided written feedback on the first composition draft, students complete the final draft outside of class, expanding, fixing, and improving their first draft in order to receive a higher grade on the final draft.

In contrast, students in the experimental group received instruction in which expert instructor feedback to the first draft was replaced by a series of in-class peer-review sessions in which each student acted as both reader and critic for his/her classmates. The first draft of the first composition was completed by students outside of class, who were then assigned to work in pairs during one 75-minute class period to complete revisions of each others' drafts. Students were given specific, explicit instructions to consider 1) grammatical accuracy, 2) purpose and audience, and 3) communicative effectiveness of each others' writing, and to engage in target language (TL) dialogue while working. Students then took their peer revisions home, and completed the suggested revisions outside of class time. The final draft produced via these in-class sessions was then turned in as a final draft, and the instructor offered expert feedback in the form of explicit correction of grammar, assessment of learner consideration of purpose and audience, and assessment of overall communicative effectiveness.

For the second composition, students were required to work in pairs (a different pair than for the first composition) during one 75-minute class period to develop ideas and plans for their first draft, to complete an outline, and to start (most did not finish) the draft. Students were given the topic at the beginning of the class period, and were again encouraged to engage in TL dialogue in order to complete the assignments in terms of grammar, audience, and communicative effectiveness. They were instructed to use the first half of the period to one learner's paper, and the second half to work on the other learner's paper. The second draft was prepared in the same way as the

first composition first draft: learners worked to correct and improve each other's first draft during one 75-minute class period.

During the experimental group class sessions devoted to peer interaction, the instructor first offered additional explanation on the writing process, along with instructions on what exactly constitutes "quality" writing. Students were then paired up and given most of the class period to carry out their peer interactions with the explicit directive of helping each to produce better writing. The instructor kept careful watch during these times, answering questions, providing additional guidance, and generally working to keep students on task and assisting each other in the composition process.

3.4 Data collection

Two timed writing assessments were administered to both experimental and control groups by their prospective section instructors. The first assessment was given during the first week of instruction for the semester, and the second assessment during the penultimate instructional week directly before final exams were administered. Both the initial and final assessments were carried out using the same writing prompt, a copy of which can be found in the Appendix to the present study. Participants were given 30 minutes to complete the writing assessment and both experimental and control group students produced between 300-400 word writing samples on both pre- and post-treatment writing assessments.

3.5 Data analysis – rating system

Two outside raters were contracted to complete the analysis of the writing samples. These raters, two Spanish-language graduate student teaching assistants (GTAs), were not directly involved in any other aspect of the present study and had no direct contact with study participants during the course of the semester. The raters received copies of the rating scales (to be discussed in the following section of this paper) and an explanation of the specific type of assessment to take place for this study. A pilot program was then carried out in which the raters were trained to apply these scales and assign scores to a small number of writing samples taken from other students not involved in this study. After this training, the raters moved on to assess the present writing samples under investigation.

Each collected writing sample was coded using a randomly-generated 6-digit number; pre-treatment and post-treatment samples were coded using different numbers. Student names were then obscured from each sample before their delivery to raters. Writing samples from all four groups (pre-treatment control, pre-treatment experimental, post-treatment control, post-treatment experimental) were then combined into a single 86-sample pool, sorted by 6-digit number (small to large), and distributed to raters for analysis. In this way, a blind analysis was conducted in which raters did not know from which group they were rating, nor if they were rating a pre-treatment or post-treatment sample.

3.6 Data analysis – units of analysis

Because this primary goal of the present study is measure overall communicative effectiveness of student writing, the accuracy of the grammar produced in these writing samples is not directly measured. However, it is measured indirectly by an assessment of learner ability to produce appropriate and comprehensible grammar in their writing samples. Additionally, learner explicit grammar knowledge was directly measured on midterm and final course examinations and compared to the performance of control group study participants. Midterm and final examinations were collected from students in both the experimental and control groups, and their grades on these exams were correlated.

Communicative effectiveness was measured first in terms of overall comprehensibility, and second in terms of the sophistication with which student writers organized and structured their compositions. Raters assigned each sample two different 1-5 ratings, and half-point awards were allowed. These scores were based on two different scales which can be found in the appendix: a comprehensibility (C) scale and a writing structure (WS) scale. The C scale assessed effectiveness in a very holistic manner: the ease with which the writing could be understood by different types of native Spanish readers. A low score indicated that the text could only be understood by a sympathetic reader, such as a language instructor intimately familiar with the English language and the effects of negative transference/interference of this L1 on learners of Spanish. Higher scores indicated that the writing could be understood even by an unsympathetic reader and/or a reader completely unfamiliar with the English language. Similarly, the WS scale presented a very holistic measure of effectiveness by looking at the way sentences and arguments were organized, along with evidence of learner control over grammar and vocabulary. A low score indicated that the writing sample consisted only of simple sentences and lacked logical flow and organization, scores improved as learners were increasingly able to make use of more complicated grammatical structures, appropriate vocabulary, and logical argument and/or presentation of information.

4 Results

4.1 *Inter-rater reliability*

The degree to which the two raters agreed on both sets of scores were calculated using a Pearson product-moment correlation. The writing structure scores saw a correlation of 0.894, with the comprehensibility scores slightly higher at 0.938. Additional information and complete statistics can be found in Table 1. In order to run the present correlations based on the best available data, differing scores were averaged in those cases in which raters were not in perfect agreement in their assessment of the writing samples.

Writing structure	Comprehensibility
$r = 0.89363$	$r = 0.93754$
$p = <0.05$	$p = <0.05$

Table 1: Inter-rater reliability

4.2 *Grammar exams*

All study participants in both sections of the present grammar and writing course completed both a midterm grammar exam and a final grammar exam as a central component of this course and all participant exam scores ($n=86$) were recorded for analysis. As a direct examination of learner performance on these exams does not constitute the primary focus of this study and is only meant to serve to eliminate a possible confounding variable from the present investigation, no deeper analysis of grammatical accuracy is presented here. The data represented in Table 2 reflect the average of all exam scores administered during the duration of this course, both from the experimental group ($n=21$ midterms and 21 final exams), as well as the control group ($n=22$ midterms and 22 final exams). A basic statistical analysis revealed no significant difference in average scores, with the control group at 79% and the experimental group at 81% overall accuracy. Standard deviation calculations are also very similar at 8 points for the experimental group and 11 points for the control, as are the maximum and minimum exam scores for all students in both groups.

	Experimental	Control
<i>Mean</i>	80.60	78.68
<i>Median</i>	82.75	80.75
<i>StDev</i>	8.26	10.85
<i>Max</i>	92.50	90.50
<i>Min</i>	63.50	50.50

Table 2: Average grammar exam scores

4.3 Comprehensibility

In terms of comprehensibility, neither group saw a statistically-significant change in the raters' overall ability to understand the writing samples. In fact, both groups saw a slight *decrease* in comprehensibility, which may be unsurprising in light of the fact that both groups of learners were strongly encouraged to use new and unfamiliar items of grammar in their compositions throughout the semester. These data can be found in Table 3.

	Control group			Experimental group	
	Pre	Post		Pre	Post
<i>Mean</i>	3.318	3.227	<i>Mean</i>	3.190	3.119
<i>Median</i>	3.375	3.250	<i>Median</i>	3.250	3.000
<i>StDev</i>	0.519	0.511	<i>StDev</i>	0.858	0.600
<i>Minimum</i>	2.000	2.500	<i>Minimum</i>	1.750	2.250
<i>Maximum</i>	4.250	4.500	<i>Maximum</i>	4.500	4.500
<i>T-Test</i>					
(2-Tailed, Paired)	P= 0.896		<i>Alpha level</i>	$\alpha = 0.05$	

Table 3: Average comprehensibility scores

The experimental group saw a drop in average scores from a 3.190 on the pre-test to a 3.119 on the post-test and the control group average dropped from 3.318 to 3.277. The standard deviation among experimental group participants was significantly higher on the pre-test (0.858 points) than on the post-test (0.600), but control group participants saw very similar standard deviations of 0.519 and 0.511 on their pre- and post-tests. Additionally, a two-tailed, paired t-test revealed these average scores to be nowhere near significant, at almost 18 times the alpha level. Higher-achieving students with relatively higher pre-test comprehensibility scores tended to produce similar scores on both the pre- and post-tests, and the majority of lower-scoring students also maintained very similar scores across both study groups. In short, little change in holistic comprehensibility was observed at any proficiency level. Although several low-scoring students did see significant improvement between their pre- and post-test scores, these more dramatic improvements do not reflect the larger overall pattern observed here. Although most of these learners were able to produce Spanish writing that was generally comprehensible to a Spanish instructor (i.e. a "sympathetic" native speaker with a knowledge of English), both study groups were largely unable to produce

Spanish-language texts that would be comprehensible to native speakers of Spanish with little or no understanding of English and who were not language instructors.

4.4 Writing structure

In terms of writing structure, neither group produced a statistically-significant improvement in the raters' assessment of the overall structure of their writing, this despite intensive instruction and practice over the course of a university semester. Pre- and post-test average scores are presented in Table 4.

	Control group		Experimental group		
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	
<i>Mean</i>	3.182	3.179	<i>Mean</i>	2.905	3.155
<i>Median</i>	3.125	3.000	<i>Median</i>	3.000	3.000
<i>StDev</i>	0.578	0.515	<i>StDev</i>	0.664	0.527
<i>Minimum</i>	2.000	2.250	<i>Minimum</i>	1.750	2.250
<i>Maximum</i>	4.000	4.000	<i>Maximum</i>	4.000	4.000
<i>T-Test</i>					
<i>(2-Tailed, Paired)</i>	p= 0.173		<i>Alpha level</i>	$\alpha = 0.05$	

Table 4: Average writing structure scores

The control group saw a very slight decrease in average writing structure score from the pre-test (3.182) to the post-test (3.159), and although the experimental group produced higher average scores on the post test (3.155) than they did on the pre-test (2.905), the difference between experimental and control group scores was not statistically significant. A two-tailed, paired t-test revealed average scores at more than three times the alpha level. Standard deviations were very similar across both groups on both the pre- and post-tests. As was the case with their comprehensibility scores, higher-achieving learners tended to maintain their writing structure scores between the pre- and post-test, and lower-achieving students in general did the same. A small number of learners increased their scores between the pre- and post-tests, and a small number saw a decrease in their scores as measured thusly. The majority of learner writers in both study groups were unable to pass beyond the “connected sentences” stage of writing proficiency in the collected writing samples.

5 Conclusions

5.1 Answers to research questions

In response to our first research question, “Does the integration of peer dialogue into an intermediate Spanish grammar and writing course lead students to produce more effective writing?”, the present findings strongly suggest that the introduction of a significant social component into an otherwise-identical FL writing classroom has little to no effect on the quality of the writing produced by course students. These results invalidate our present working hypothesis, in that encouraging these FL learners to engage in speech for the purposes of composing did not appear to lead to improvements in either overall comprehensibility or sophistication of writing structure. The

experimental group did not outperform the control group on either of the present measures of writing quality, despite the fact that a substantial amount of experimental group class time was devoted to student-teacher dialogue on the writing process and explanation of what constitutes good writing structure, and that these students were constantly encouraged to use each other as immediate audience for both writing structure and writing comprehensibility. The present approach did not appear to have any even short-term effects on learner ability to produce a semi-original composition on a topic they had recently seen and written about on the pre-test as evidenced by post-test scores.

Our working hypothesis was also invalidated in terms of our second research question, “Does shifting the instructional focus of an intermediate Spanish grammar and writing course away from explicit grammatical instruction hurt students’ ability to produce accurate, comprehensible writing?” Where we expected to see a drop in student grammatical accuracy, either on course grammar exams or in their writing, no such result was observed. Not only did both experimental and control groups receive similar comprehensibility scores on the blind analysis of their writing samples, but they also received very similar scores on their course grammar exams. The present highly-social FL writing classroom did not appear to make any difference, positive or negative, in the accuracy of the grammar produced by course students.

5.2 Discussion

The present results strongly suggest that intermediate Spanish students may not experience dramatic benefits as a result of participation in a highly-social grammar and writing classroom as directly compared to a more traditional, individualistic and teacher-fronted form of writing instruction. Our findings partially support a portion of the results reported by Weissberg (2000), who observed that using speech for composition instruction did not lead to improvements in ESL students’ grammatical accuracy or overall grammatical sophistication. However, our results dispute another of the claims made by Weissberg (2000), that student-teacher and student-student dialogue might improve student ability to revise and edit their own texts. This did not prove to be the case here however: the present study participants did not appear to improve in their ability to revise nor edit their own texts, whose overall levels of comprehensibility and writing structure were virtually identical to their peers in the control group, who received more traditional, teacher-fronted instruction. Our results cast further doubt on the Whole Language movement ideal that writing instruction is enhanced by the introduction of dialogue into the writing course, and it remains unclear if learners are able to utilize their acquired oral language to produce better quality TL writing. Where we hoped to show a direct link between speech and writing proficiency development among these FL learners, no such link was to be found in the present data. Although speech and writing have been observed to progress at similar rates among some L2 learners (Hubert 2008; Weissberg 2006), this relationship may not be one of causality as some may assume. The similarity in productive proficiency development among these learners may be coincidental, not causal in nature.

5.3 Implications for pedagogy

These results alone should not be taken as evidence that dialogue does not belong in FL writing instruction. This area of inquiry is still very poorly understood in many respects, and we wish to strongly assert that to abandon the idea of integrating speech into the FL writing curriculum based solely on this type of evidence is not advisable. Likewise, the wholesale application of L2 speaking and/or writing theory to U.S. university FL classroom instruction may be equally unwise, especially if the unique motivational needs of these learners are not taken into account. We believe that a more social approach to teaching writing, such as the one investigated in this study, may indeed represent the future of L2 writing instruction, as in recent years the fields of both SLA and L2 writing research have become increasingly aware of the importance of sociocultural perspec-

tives for language acquisition and teaching. As we continue to move away from an understanding of and approach to writing as a cognitive process carried out by discreet individuals towards a more balanced approach recognizing the socially-situated nature of writing products and processes, the need for this type of writing instruction is likely to grow as well.

The present results suggest that the implementation of a highly-social approach to teaching writing to FL students must be carried out with caution and careful planning if it is to be successful. If this type of approach is to be used with FL learners, especially those whose previous language instruction has been largely/wholly individualistic, instructors should not necessarily expect that their students will be eager to engage with each other in successful, productive peer composing, nor that will this practice by itself necessarily lead students to more closely consider writing purpose and audience. We would recommend an approach to this type of instruction that does not necessarily require students to write for an outside, “general” audience, nor necessarily requires the practicing of a limited set of grammatical structures. Instead, writing prompts and assessments should be designed to encourage the creation of texts that are (1) tailored to activate the background knowledge of each specific group of students (or perhaps using multiple prompts tailored to individual students), (2) assessed in a way that obligates learners to provide peer feedback on the communicative effectiveness of their writing. This type of assessment should also include on-going explicit instruction on the social nature of writing and on the consideration of purpose and audience in writing.

In addition, the overall lack of improvement in accuracy, comprehensibility, and writing structure scores in both experimental and control groups calls into question the efficacy of not only the somewhat novel FL methodology tested here, but also the more traditional teacher-fronted instruction presented to the control group. Writing instruction in which students write about “standard” topics meant to build targeted vocabulary and grammar does not appear to lead to significant improvements in FL student writing as measured here.

5.4 *Limitations and future research*

This study does suffer from several important limitations which may have influenced our empirical outcomes. First, due to the fact that the present intermediate Spanish grammar and writing course represented the only such instruction offered at this university, the pool of available participants was rather small. Also, two intact course sections were used in the present analysis, one comprising the experimental group and the other the control group, despite the methodological shortcomings that such an approach entails.

Second, the pre- and post-test writing sample elicitation prompts were by necessity nearly identical (see Appendix), and this could have led to memorization and repetition by some study participants. These prompts also specifically reminded students to “use the preterit and the imperfect as necessary.” Because of the fact that these two grammatical structures were specifically elicited in the writing prompts, the desire to produce accurate grammar may have interfered with study participants’ ability to focus on the communicative and/or functional aspects of their writing, despite the explicit instructions in the elicitation prompts to use what they had learned during the semester in their writing samples. Future research should specifically investigate the effect of grammar in writing prompts on student ability to focus on and/or address the communicative function of their writing.

Third, the present methodology does not take into account an important factor that may have contributed to the quality of the comprehensibility and/or accuracy of participant writing samples: the fact that FL students acting as collaborating peers were not truly the readership for whom the present class compositions were written. Our working hypothesis assumed that a collaborating peer would constitute an immediate an ongoing audience for these student writers, and that this interaction and feedback would allow both learners to produce a higher-quality written product. Although this hypothesis makes sense from the standpoint that shared responsibility and teamwork

often lead to success, no collaborating peer could truly constitute a native Spanish-speaking audience for the other, and this may also have affected our comprehensibility and/or writing structure results. Future research should attempt to address this shortcoming by providing students with a more authentic immediate audience, perhaps in the form of an online collaboration with native Spanish-speaking students learning English as a foreign language.

Lastly, many of the experimental course students expressed dissatisfaction with the present experimental approach in their university semester course evaluations. It is important to note that many of these students were expecting to receive a certain style of instruction in this type of course, and in fact many stated their preference for the more traditional approach of explicit grammar explanation and assessment. These students did not appear to appreciate the less-structured approach taken here which forced them to become more active participants in their own learning. This may have affected the present data in unforeseen ways, but unfortunately such an analysis is beyond the scope of this study. Student attitudes and opinions towards the instruction they receive are important as well, and should be taken into account in the implementation of this type of approach. Making this type of approach work may involve the convincing of students themselves of the validity of this approach for their learning. Future research should address this problem, and should seek to describe the attitudes and opinions that FL students hold toward writing and its effect (or lack thereof) on their language learning.

Notes

¹ Although the two course sections employed an identical midterm exam, the final exams were slightly different from each other. Therefore, data taken from these final exams was limited to test questions of identical/very similar nature: approximately 50% of the total points available. The experimental group course section final exam contained questions pertaining to the writing process not present in the control group final exam.

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Appendices

Appendix 1

Pre-treatment writing prompt

You will have 30 minutes to complete the following writing assignment. Please do the best job you can on the following topic:

Escribe cómo era tu vida en el pasado y cómo es tu vida ahora: qué cosas son iguales, o diferentes, y cómo has cambiado tú. Usa el pretérito o el imperfecto según convenga.

Translation: “Write about how your life used to be in the past and what your life is like today: what things are the same, or different, and how you have changed. Use the preterit and the imperfect as necessary.”

Appendix 2

Post-treatment writing prompt

You will have 30 minutes to complete the following writing assignment. Please do the best job you can, using what you have learned this semester, on the following topic:

Escribe cómo era tu vida en el pasado y cómo es tu vida ahora: qué cosas son iguales, o diferentes, y cómo has cambiado tú. Usa el pretérito o el imperfecto según convenga.

Translation: “Write about how your life used to be in the past and what your life is like today: what things are the same, or different, and how you have changed. Use the preterit and the imperfect as necessary.”

Appendix 3

Rater Rubrics

3.1 Comprehensibility

1. Comprehension of text only possible with a great deal of difficulty by a sympathetic native speaker of Spanish ¥ extremely incomprehensible ¥ Extreme interference of English on written Spanish
2. Comprehension is effortful for a sympathetic native speaker of Spanish ¥ some sections are incomprehensible ¥ heavy influence of English on written Spanish
3. Text is easily comprehended by a sympathetic native speaker of Spanish ¥ generally comprehensible ¥ some influence of English on written Spanish
4. Text is easily comprehended by an unsympathetic native speaker of Spanish ¥ completely comprehensible ¥ very little influence of English on Spanish
5. Text is (almost) perfectly understandable by any native speaker of Spanish. Very few to no errors apparent in written Spanish / no apparent influence of English on Spanish

3.2 Writing Structure

1. **Simple sentences** – text consists of short, common expressions and/or memorized “chunks” that are combined together to make simple sentences. There is little evidence that the writer is able to control

more advanced grammatical structures, there is very little logical flow to the writing, very few details provided, does little to directly address the writing prompt

2. **Strings of sentences** – text consists of mostly complete sentences, which may address parts of the writing prompt but are not organized in a logical way, and could be easily reorganized without any significant loss of meaning. Writer uses more than a select group of verbs and other vocabulary words, and shows that he/she can control at least some of the more advanced elements of language, such as prepositional phrases, verbal phrases, adjectival phrases, etc.
3. **Connected sentences** – text consists of sentences which are less formulaic (more than simple memorization of common “chunks”) and original. Writer shows evidence of some topical and/or logical organization; sentences may be grouped together in logical ways, addressing different aspects of the prompt. These may be joined together at times with appropriate transition words (conjunctions) such as *primero*, *entonces*, *así que*, *por fin*, *después*, etc. Writer uses more than a select vocabulary, and shows that he/she can control at least some of the more advanced elements of language.
4. **Logical paragraph** – text contains a clear introduction and subsequent arguments and proceeds in a highly organized and logical way. Writer moves seamlessly from one thought to the next, using transition words when appropriate. Writer displays the use of a large variety of verbs and other elements of language necessary to complete the writing prompt in a thorough manner.
5. **Native-like writing** - text is written in true paragraph style, addresses the writing prompt completely, containing a large variety of grammatical structures and elements of vocabulary, very few to no errors, and follows a very coherent, logical style of presentation such as would produce an educated native speaker of Spanish.