

*Thinking about Writing:*

The challenge of writing assignments at the intermediate French language level

While teaching an intermediate level French course at UC Berkeley in fall 2014, I noted that students had an ambiguous relationship with writing assignments in L2. The mid-semester evaluations fell shortly after we had devoted part of two class periods to a thesis statement activity which meant to address, generally, the issue of moving from an observation to an argument. In their evaluations, a few students described our work on writing as *valuable*, because it promoted critical thinking skills that could be used in other courses, thereby indicating that one perceived function of writing in L2 is to help shed new light on the writing process that takes place in L1. Other students seemed strangely hostile toward writing activities in the foreign language classroom. Although compositions in French 3 and 4 currently constitute 25% of the students' overall grade, students did not seem to appreciate the writing process or understand how it might tie into other instructional goals of the course. To quote one student: "I don't know why we are spending so much time on writing when we could be working on our French." (To be clear, the thesis statement activities and discussions were conducted in French.) Such comments demonstrate a commonly held belief that writing is a secondary skill in beginning to intermediate foreign language classrooms. Especially in the context of communicative language teaching (CLT), other language modalities – oral fluency, vocabulary, grammar, and reading skills – tend to fit more naturally into the curriculum and are expected to be emphasized in the classroom over the more laborious process of communicating and constructing meaning in the

modality of writing.<sup>1</sup> Intriguingly, in the mid-semester evaluations, no one wrote that the writing exercises helped them with other linguistic elements promoted in the course. This class essentially viewed writing in French in one of two ways: as an action that distracts from language acquisition, or as a means to develop writing techniques more globally.

And if intermediate French students indicate that they have an unclear relationship with writing, it appears as if instructors also grapple with the exact role that writing plays in their classrooms. One reason for this ambiguity – and anxiety – is that it is a *transitional moment*. In lower level French, writing exercises tend to focus on subjective experience, description, and the use of new vocabulary and grammar. The parameters of writing in beginning FL are largely defined by the linguistic elements that students can effectively use, or try out. A first or second semester FL writing exercise will typically produce phrases such as, “When I was young, I used to play soccer with my friends on the weekend,” or, “I liked the Impressionist paintings at the museum the best because I appreciate their use of colors.” When collegiate students move into more advanced FL courses, however, their writing assignments usually require more critical thinking skills. For instance, the intermediate French course I teach asks students to perform literary analysis, to discuss a text – a piece of writing – in a smart, argumentative and organized way. Thus the transition to a different mode of writing is initiated. The underlying idea is that students need to be equipped for the writing demands of upper division French courses. They need to demonstrate more than grammatical competence. A cultural sensitivity to genre-based writing activities and a solid grasp of what constitutes literary analysis are equally (even if *implicitly*) at stake in their writing assignments. And yet, there has not been sufficient work

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<sup>1</sup> In *A Multiliteracies Framework for Collegiate Foreign Language Teaching*, Kate Paesani, Heather Willis Allen, and Beatrice Dupuy discuss these details while examining various approaches to FL writing instruction (see Ch. 6: “Teaching Writing as Designing Meaning Through Texts”).

devoted directly to the issue of transitioning the intermediate FL student into a different *mode of thinking about their writing*.

As a Berkeley Language Center Fellow in the spring semester of 2015, I began a research project in response to a growing concern in our department about the writing skills of second year students, the consensus being: *students need to write better*. In order to get a clearer definition of the issue, I started with a set of surveys. One was given to students who had taken French 3 and/or French 4 at UC Berkeley. Another was for Graduate Student Instructors (GSIs) and lecturers who teach – or have taught – French 3 and/or 4. Finally, there was a survey for the professors and lecturers who teach the first upper division French course. The major points brought up by instructors were: students do not understand what a literary analysis is; students have problems formulating a thesis statement; students are not properly using the text to support a claim; their ideas lack explicit, logical connections; and, students think that only their grammar counts. Students mentioned the following: they appreciate and want more feedback on their drafts; on second drafts, students correct grammar and generally leave content alone; students feel uncomfortable, or unsatisfied, with peer-editing activities; and as they move into more advanced FL courses they feel pushed into a more difficult and formal writing register. (For survey details, see **Appendix 1**.)

The concerns expressed in the surveys shaped my project. First of all, it seemed as if intermediate FL students could benefit from models which stage the process of writing about writing. Although our textbook (*Réseau*) has literary excerpts and essay prompts, and each chapter addresses a selected part of writing (the introduction, the body paragraph, the conclusion), it does not provide full-length sample essays to show students what *writing about writing* can look like at their appropriate French level. Furthermore, students need to encounter

how ideas and arguments can be revised – or reshaped – in drafting and editing. Finally, it occurred to me that if students are being asked to improve their writing techniques and develop better analytical moves at the intermediate FL level, then the classroom needs to be a space in which students can discuss and think about writing in “low-stakes” scenarios. As Elbow and Sorcinelli (2006) argue, low-stakes writing activities can foster a more exploratory and experimental atmosphere which “increases fluency and confidence in writing and helps with creativity and risk taking” (p. 193). My idea, then, was to design writing samples, or templates, which offer our students the occasion and the means to *think* about their *writing* in a low-stakes context.

My enthusiasm for models may be met with some skepticism. And, rightfully so. The prevailing fear is that (genre-based) textual models, used systematically, become overly prescriptive. But, my suggested use of templates is meant to showcase a multiplicity of approaches and outcomes for the given writing assignment. The intention is to furnish students with samples of writing they can emulate and, more importantly, critique and edit, and in so doing, empower students to design their own meaning and argumentative gestures. The models I work with are intentionally *not perfect* for a variety of reasons. I use ones that depict an intermediate student’s writing level. I believe that when students are only exposed to impeccable writing samples at a native speaker’s level, then unrealistic expectations get set up in the student’s mind, and this is precisely the point at which plagiarism and Google translate issues become more pronounced. Although fluent francophone writing samples are important in the classroom (yes – the ultimate goal is to have our students expressing themselves at that level), these examples should be used strategically and carefully, since the average student who has

only taken the equivalent of two semesters of college French cannot produce writing – independently and honestly – at this register.

Another reason I prefer writing samples with imperfections is that it exposes students to a reviewing process without the uncomfortable ambiance of true, peer-editing activities. When students read writing at their intermediate FL level in the context of peer-review, the atmosphere is usually one of mistrust or unease, as students define peer-editing work as “condescending,” “competitive,” and/or “a waste of time.” Yet, a discussion and re-working of sample writing – in a collective setting – is paramount to discovering the mechanisms behind articulating a logical argument and writing appropriately for a genre-specific assignment. Students need to see, in a very concrete way, how their writing can move to the next level without feeling as if their personal ideas and writing are “put on the spot.”

My incorporation of models in the FL classroom is additionally inspired by writing manuals intended for college-level English courses, such as *They Say/I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing* (Graff, Birkenstein, and Durst, 2012) and *Writing Analytically* (Rossenwasser and Stephen, 2008). If Anglophones benefit from models which demonstrate and explain writing styles and techniques for their English writing assignments, then the intermediate level FL student could surely benefit from models in the FL which similarly stage the writing process.

The first unit I designed took essays at the French 3 level and color-coded them so that students can visualize and parse out the elements of an essay. (The subject is Ionesco’s short story found in chapter 1 of *Réseau*, « Quatrième conte pour enfants de moins de trois ans. ») The unit is therefore intended for use early on in French 3.) The color coding breaks down the essays into four main categories: 1) ideas/argument, 2) the use of the text (with the subcategories

paraphrasing and direct citation), 3) the development of ideas (with subcategories on transitions and organization) and finally 4) grammar. By highlighting grammatical errors at the end of the color-coding sequence, the intention is to foreground analytical and structural features of writing. The color coding offers students the occasion to pin point the elements of an essay and to see how they figure together (to various degrees of success). It further underscores the revision process: after the color coding sequence, there are examples of the essays rewritten, taking into account the strengths and weaknesses of the highlighted categories. My color-coded models are meant to facilitate a discussion and critique of the writing. Although I have highlighted the different categories on two of the samples, it is possible that students might wish to highlight the essays differently. And this is great. A class discussion where students articulate, for instance, what they detect as the logical connections of an argument promotes yet another level of awareness. The unit ends with a non-color-coded sample essay on the same subject that the students can color code themselves and then rewrite. For subsequent compositions, students could be asked to color-code their work as well before turning it in. (For an instructor's guide and suggested lesson plan, see **Appendix 2.a**; for the color-coded essays and a color-coding activity, see **Appendices 2.b, 2.c and 2.d.**)

In my next unit, I explicitly stage the process of writing and revising a thesis statement and introductory paragraph. The examples use two short films from *Paris je t'aime*: "Le Marais" and "14e arrondissement". These films are short (about 5 minutes each) and can easily be viewed in class or at home on YouTube. The themes of the films (love, communication, cultural diversity, and the experience of urban space) tie into the central themes presented throughout *Réseau* and this activity can be used in French 3 or 4. This unit begins with a sample thesis statement and introduction on "Le Marais" at the French 3/4 level. *"It's worth exploring how the*

*film shows, in reality, that the relation between the French man and the English man is superficial.*” We have all encountered these kinds of lackluster statements. And, in response, it is common for instructors to give students an example of a polished thesis statement, ultimately suggesting: “*this* is what it could look like,” or, “you should try to do something *more like this*,” without insisting on the hard work that went into its creation.

So, using techniques advocated and described by David Rosenwasser and Jill Stephen in *Writing Analytically*, the unit steps through the process of taking underdeveloped ideas and revising them to create a thesis with more critical weight. I am applying a more “American” model of college level writing to the assignment in French. While looking at vague thesis statements, *Writing Analytically* stresses the question “So what?” and shows students what kinds of questions can be asked to arrive at a stronger, more compelling, central idea. My unit takes the observation (presented as a thesis) that the men in the film “Le Marais” have a superficial relationship and asks *Et alors?*: What is superficial? Why is that interesting? What can be argued about their relationship? What specific elements in the film support that idea? In this staged example, the thesis evolves into: “Considering the lack of communication and the language barrier in this film, we can say that the film complicates, in a comical manner, the notion that we each have a perfect partner, a soul mate.”

After delineating this revision process, the unit turns to the film “14 arrondissement” and encourages students to adapt and revise a thesis statement by themselves. By providing “bad” sample thesis statements ready to work on and by giving students questions which force them to approach the general topic from different angles, students can focus their attention on how to modify and give definition to the ideas. There is no longer the pressure of *what, exactly, do I have to say?* Instead, there is a “low-stakes” opportunity to present a given point in a more

meaningful and argumentative manner. Thus, the student's personal intervention comes into play. One underdeveloped statement offered in the unit is: "14<sup>th</sup> arrondissement demonstrates that in love there is joy and sadness." Students can be asked to work on it individually, or in small groups. The unit concludes with five full length sample introductions on the topic (which are, in fact, anonymous samples from previous French 4 students who gave their consent). These introductions can be reviewed and edited together in class. "Love has an element of sadness and joy" evolves into more articulate positions: one example narrows in on Carol's feeling of being alive and how it relates to conflictual emotions, another introduction looks at the joy and sadness evident in Carol's voice – the comic and tragic expressed in her mispronunciation – and then argues that the juxtaposition of her voice's narrative with the film's images offers us that peculiar mix of *joie et tristesse*. Students can therefore read and review "peer work" without actually critiquing any of their peers – they can see a multiplicity of argumentative approaches stemming from an underdeveloped statement. (See **Appendix 3** for this unit's instructor's guide and activities.)

The third module I worked on familiarizes students with a different genre of writing: the *explication de texte*. In my discussions with GSIs, lecturers, and professors, a woeful refrain came up: students do not know how to perform a basic *explication de texte*. Now this mode of writing has its own criteria, and requires that students write about a text in an unaccustomed (and perhaps counterintuitive) way. Whereas most writing assignments at this point in this program encourage the development of critical thinking skills, emphasizing original arguments and creativity, the *explication de texte* does not foreground innovation. Rather, it requires students to describe the formal features of a text and talk through it in chronological order. The analysis component comes through defining how the textual elements contribute to the "purpose" of the



text. And the originality of the writing comes from the ability to work with textual details. But, generally speaking, students at this level do not know 1) how to properly use/cite textual evidence and 2) how to avoid subjective interpretations and/or vacuous résumés of the text. Moreover, students are not aware of the function and cultural value of this particular writing modality. It is worthwhile to explain how the *explication de texte* figures crucially in French culture, for it is an essential part of every francophone student's academic training. It is an alien concept to students coming out of the American high-school system. But like the five-paragraph essay for American students, the *explication de texte* is truly engrained in the French student's psyche. Though it is formulaic, rigid and traditional, the skills acquired through it (how to "piece apart" a text, how to gather textual details, how to thoroughly and slowly read a text, etc.) have a usefulness that is applicable to other writing formats and linguistic modalities. While it may be considered a "formulaic dinosaur of the French institution" (as one skeptical colleague put it), I find that the *explication de texte* opens up a novel engagement with texts for FL students, an engagement which can, in turn, prepare them for literary, analytical argumentation.

This unit goes over Micheline Dufau's and Ellen D'Alelio's breakdown of the *explication de texte* (*Découverte du poème*, 1967), and provides an example of this writing exercise at the French 3/4 level. Dufau's and D'Alelio's explanation of the writing format takes up several pages written in dense French. Since time management is a concern in the classroom, my handout illustrates the essential information in two pages. It has questions for students to answer after they have gone over the example, which are designed to stimulate a more critical engagement with the form and objectives of the *explication de texte*. The point here is to give them a model that they could have realistically written themselves and then spend time assessing it together. The model is deliberately flawed: following along with the handout that explains the

form and content of the *explication de texte*, most students can easily come up with a couple things they would add or change. Additional questions are included for group work and class discussion. Since these questions ask about formalistic features of the poem that were not directly mentioned in the sample *explication de texte*, the exercise allows students to think more independently about the poem. Students are additionally asked to look up an example online of an *explication de texte* written by a native French speaker before being assigned to write one. (For this unit's instructor's guide, suggested lesson plans, and handouts, see **Appendix 4**)

This unit was generously piloted this semester by two GSIs teaching French 4, my deepest thanks to Katherine Levine and Elyse Ritchy. I tweaked some of the questions and edited the sample essay after hearing about the experience in their classes. The overall response to it was positive. Both instructors said it was extremely helpful to have the sample essay, as students enjoyed reading and critiquing it. One GSI said that in a previous course she had tried out an *explication de texte* and it was one of the more disastrous writing assignments of the semester. But when she taught it using this unit, her students understood the parameters of the assignment and wrote amazing work. One GSI explained that her class's *explications de texte* ended up producing the best arguments of the semester. This “formulaic dinosaur of the French institution” – as it turns out – opens up new ways of perceiving and constructing meaning with the text. The process of slowly reading and methodically accounting for the formalistic features of the text helped students come to a new understanding of literature and how to write about it.

The last project I worked on was a writer's log. The writer's log is an adapted activity from Peter Elbow's and Mary Sorcinelli's chapter in *McKeachie's Teaching Tips* (2006). The goal of it is to promote a more efficient feedback loop between students and instructors and to streamline the correction process. According to student surveys, students at the intermediate

French language level want to have more feedback on their written assignments and they believe that comments from their instructors help them improve their writing. And yet, at this juncture, the feedback tends to emphasize grammatical errors, vocabulary usage, and syntax. Students therefore lean toward correcting the mechanics of the language in second drafts and often neglect to revise and/or develop their ideas along the way. By asking students to fill out a quick writer's log to submit with a first draft, they are able to communicate specific concerns with the instructor while actively reflecting upon their writing process. The exercise is in English to facilitate communication and to keep it quick and simple. By requiring students to state succinctly the main point of their paper and to explain what they found challenging about the writing process, the students must *think* about how they write, and the instructor can effectively address the students' individual concerns. I adapted the writer's log to promote an engagement with language use and acquisition since students are asked to write out a few examples of new phrases/vocabulary they tried in the paper and to tell the instructor about any notable uncertainties they had about their usage. (See **Appendix 5**.)

The writer's log was piloted in three French 4 classrooms. I want to thank my colleagues Rachel Shuh, Daniel Hoffmann, and Elyse Ritchy for experimenting with me. Discussing the writer's logs with them, I was impressed with the detailed way in which students assessed their work. The question "What are your questions for me, the instructor reviewing your writing?" and the question that asked them to tell about one new thing they tried out and would like verified yielded interesting responses. There were questions about style, specific grammatical points, the flow of paragraphs, comparisons with expressions in English, the clarity of their argument. This is exciting: students are examining both the content and form of their writing and reflecting on the way they are constructing and communicating meaning in a foreign language.

There is, however, a catch to the writer's log: it takes extra time for the instructor. One GSI told me that addressing student concerns took about five extra minutes per composition (and when you are correcting 17-20 compositions, that time adds up), but comments made on the writer's log reduced the amount of written feedback on the essay itself. Another instructor told me it was closer to 15 extra minutes of correction time per composition, as she was surprised and happy with her students' reflections and felt compelled to give thorough responses. Everyone who piloted the writer's log thought there is a lot to be gained by creating a more communicative feedback loop. The standard MO is generally to tell students what they did nicely, indicate what they need to change or work on, assign a grade. The writer's log opens up a new space of dialogue. And from the small, sampled group, this dialogue improved the writing in the second draft.

For my concluding remarks, I want to return to my title: *Thinking about Writing*: the challenge of writing assignments at the intermediate French language level, and offer you a couple ways of reading it. On the one hand, the challenge is for the students: writing in a foreign language is challenging. And at this transitional intermediate level, students need to work on their writing techniques and on their analytical moves. But, obviously, as pedagogues, the challenge is in our court as well. How are we offering our students the occasion and the means to *think* about their *writing*? As you have probably caught on by now, I am a proponent of models, especially models that can be discussed and re-molded, revised together to highlight how writing is an effortful, communication process. I believe that at the intermediate level, we are doing our language students a disservice when we simply assign writing without discussing its particular contours. Or, when we supply students with pristine examples without actively explaining how they can reach that level. If the main challenge is time management, then I hope the units I've

designed can streamline and structure the discussion of writing in the classroom. I hope that the models and units I've created can be used by other FL instructors to help students think about the writing process.

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