Fostering Academic Writing Expertise in Students:
Spanish Program at ICU

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Foreign language education in Japan has been widely criticized in the literature for not producing students capable of authentic language production. Spanish language education in Japan has not escaped this criticism despite its being far less established than the predominant second language, English, which students generally study formally for six years. At International Christian University (ICU), Japan, Spanish is an elective subject students may choose, and teachers have at most two years to develop a syllabus that allows students to develop their speaking and writing skills with limited exposure to authentic language. In this paper, the author demonstrates how to develop a syllabus that promotes writing in Spanish designed mostly for Japanese students starting from short easy texts and culminating in simplified academic texts. The syllabus has been designed from an analysis of the most common errors taken from a specialized corpus and from own experience and takes in consideration practical needs in the classroom. This paper will be of interest to teachers of other elective languages with limited contact time in which to develop student fluency and writing expertise.

Spanish education in Japan has had a long tradition in this country; however, it was badly injured and banned during the *Sakoku* (Japanese total international seclusion from 1641 to 1853) and only came back in the 1950s when other foreign alphabetical languages, mainly English but also French and German, were already established. As a consequence of this, Spanish education in Japan arrived late and in clear disadvantage in relation with the languages mentioned earlier.

Most Spanish scholars that arrived during that period until the 1990s were Christian missionaries with few if not any training in language education. This fact delayed the development of Spanish education in Japan and even today we can see that Spanish Education is not fully spread in Japanese education in the same way it is in many other countries in the world.

Gradually Spanish education at universities is expanding and nowadays we can assert that the Spanish language in Japan is becoming the most popular foreign language after English at the same level as Chinese. Under these circumstances universities are reacting and implementing programs that help the creation and implementation of foreign language syllabi other than English.

Still today only a few universities include Spanish as a Major but fortunately enough many universities include Spanish as a second foreign language after English. ICU is a very highly reputed institution in Japan regarding bilingual education in English and Japanese. It is within this institution that the World Language Program was created to give an opportunity to bilingual students to start an elective second foreign language. In this paper we will

demonstrate our experience on creating and implementing a syllabus on writing Spanish as a foreign language at ICU.

Background

During the six trimesters that a student may take Spanish education at ICU, only the second half is devoted partially to writing, the first year being focussed on developing oral skills. This fact compromises the development of a very compact and meticulous syllabus that foster the writing expertise necessary to achieve a satisfactory level of writing skills as to being able to cope and write simplified academic texts.

The problem arises when teachers in charge or the writing courses of Spanish in Japan often confuse the skills of writing with the skill of translating since their courses are based on translation from Japanese to Spanish. This predominant traditional method goes together with the fact that most textbooks designed for Spanish composition are mainly focussed on morpho-syntactical issues and consequently they ignore writing strategies and text modelling knowledge, both contents being absolutely necessary to reach a competence in academic writing.

There are some exceptions of books that cover these contents (Ferreiro, 1997) but they are not designed for L2 or L3 learners. Since it is not possible to cover the full contents of those textbooks in the ICU context due to time restrictions and methodology, we must design a syllabus that foster academic writing expertise in our students, but the problem arises when we have less than one year to do this.

As mentioned above, the current English for Liberal Arts Program (ELA) has a solid reputation as one of the best English programs in Japan. During the first year, all first year students need to take writing and reading courses in English which prepare them to acquire the writing superstructures (i.e. global structures that characterize to type of text, such as narration, description, and exposition) in other languages later rather easily. If we consider this very important fact we can be prepared to design a syllabus that includes the necessary structural information from the beginning but focusing mainly on a selection of morphological and rhetorical problems of the Spanish writing system.

The methodology underlying the Spanish writing course at ICU comprises a holistic model of writing based not only on an adaptation and continuation of the ELA program of the previous year but also on a previous study of significant error analysis data (Soriano, 1976). As we will see later, the key ideas in this paper are educational adaptation and cooperation between two different departments: ELA and World Languages, Spanish.

Since our students already have formal writing expertise training in English and Japanese we can assume that a contrastive methodology that withdraws from the L1 and L2 to the L3 (Spanish) can be applied in such a way that students can benefit from a program that provide objectives that would be really unattainable in such short period of time in any other educational context in Japan. The syllabus must also consider learner's diversity in three ways: (a) not all students are experienced writers in L1 or L2, (b) undergraduate students and graduate students with more writing expertise co-learn the same contents and (c) the class is composed of a multicultural and multilingual group of students [1] so language and idiosyncratic rhetorical patterns (Kaplan, 1987) are diverse from one another.

Syllabus Sequence

This composition course is part of the second year studying Spanish at ICU. When students decide to continue their studies in Spanish they can take Advanced Spanish, an 8-week course administered in time in three trimesters. Advanced Spanish is designed to improve the four skills and the composition course is obviously designed to enhance writing skills in our students.

The ultimate purpose of the writing course is to develop writing skills in students so that they can write simplified academic texts autonomously. To get to that point we prepare students with a variety of texts models and different exercises, including thinking aloud and peer activities that enhance topic knowledge and writing strategies (Hayes & Flower, 1987) but also morphological, rhetorical and text structure awareness. The sequence of the syllabus also takes into consideration the elective nature of the subject so that students must feel a sense of unity each term and continuity from term to term.

Before analysing the present syllabus let us revise what students already have learned in their previous ELA courses. The English program at ICU is not focussed in linguistic content only but it is rather concerned in text modelling that emphasizes the display and then enhancing of writing strategies through analysis and emulation of model rhetorical and structural exponents.

The basic core of this writing course include a sort of linguistic items to internalize definitions, paraphrasing, summarizing, comparison structures and cause and effect structures. A parallel course focuses on writing an essay in English. The different ideas provided include techniques to outline/draft an essay and how to create its parts: introduction, essay body and conclusion (ELP[2], 2011).

It is then expectable that when students start learning Spanish at ICU not only they already have a good command of English, but also they are expected to have studied and practised some basics of rhetoric writing strategies such as planification, textualization, revision, correction, cohesion, etc. and superstructures (i.e. global structures that are characteristic of particular types of text, such as narration, description, and exposition) in a foreign language writing model. This course consists of 8 weekly hours including 2 hours tutorial per week and is devised for all first year students.

When devising this syllabus the authors had to consider group diversity. It has been widely investigated how English speakers use linearity when writing, or how Japanese students rhetoric patterns are very professionally organized but ambiguous (Hinds, 1983; Kubota, 1997) but specially the Japanese group display insecurity at the lexical level, as Cumming (1995) specifies in "article use, pronoun reference, or clause structure" (p. 391). Although we are dealing with a diverse group of students we must consider the previous characteristics but not forget there is predominant student group in the class. That being said we must conclude that probably even expert writers in English or Japanese as a L1 or L2 may encounter similar problems in a Romance language such as Spanish not only because of the obvious linguistic differences but also because the rhetorical devises in this language tend to stray from the point with apparent irrelevant descriptions. These differences will aggravate when we know that most of our students have studied just one year of this language[3].

As evidence and experience tells us (Benson, 1995) under these special conditions and since the codes are approximate our contrastive methodology to teaching writing in Spanish will draw knowledge mostly from the students' L1 or L2 (English) to their L3 or L4 (Spanish). The starting point must be the most common morphological and syntactical errors that these students make and then move on to the discourse level (Hinds, 1979) so as to foster a better understanding and management of the cultural thought patterns (Kaplan, 1987) in Spanish later.

The sequence of tasks and activities within this writing composition course has similar features every time so that students feel more comfortable about it and can concentrate better on educational contents rather than understanding instructions. The sequence starts from very controlled exercises to more open ones until a final writing production is achieved in class. After the class they are expected to write some short compositions to be corrected and discuss in class during the beginning of the next session. They are also expected to write one long composition that will gain complexity gradually and will be graded and handed back for review. Later students rewrite their long compositions and upload them in an internet group making their final document available for peers as part of the evaluation system. Let us see in detail how the contents are incorporated in the syllabus.

The first trimester of this course covers the following contents:

1) The first content block deals with articles: determinate, indeterminate and absence of articles. The student is exposed to a systematic paradigm or the uses of articles in Spanish and analyse the use of every one of them, then they recreate them in groups and some other activities. As part of the homework and to enhance discourse coherence later on in the program we start practising with the most useful sentence connectors in Spanish. The ultimate goal in this first writing practise is for the student to gain confidence in their writing skill of Spanish, so the first draft they write is very focussed on the grammatical knowledge acquired in class.

2) The second content block is focussed on concordances of gender and number within different morphological and syntactical elements of the sentence. Sentence connection continues being studied.

3) The last content block covers syntax and semantics in the sentence level for the first time. Altered morphosyntactic order and its semantic implications in Spanish are fully explored in this section. This is also the last time that we see sentence connections systematically in the course.

   The final documents that students need to handle are: a) free composition in order to determine the initial writing skills of the group, b) actual news, c) a note, d) an informal e-mail, e) a formal letter and f) a postcard. These first hand outs try to cover a personal scope.

   During the second semester we start dealing with paragraph structure and the syllabus starts an orientation towards academic writing for the first time. We can summarize the contents as follow:

4) The fourth content block deals with unity and coherence, sentence length and the main ideas and supportive ideas at paragraph level. A summary of the most important sentence connectors is reviewed.

5) The fifth content block is focussed on techniques to expand ideas within the paragraph. These techniques include argumentation, definition, exemplification, comparisons and detail organization within the paragraph.

   The final documents that students must handle in are: (a) a personal anecdote in order to determine the overall writing skills of the group, (b) descriptive text with some information provided so that student need to construct accordingly, (c) an exposition and its scheme, and (d) Three different texts that employ each time different techniques to

expand ideas in the paragraph.

The last trimester deals exclusively with the three textual pillars that compose the academic texts in a single content block:

6) The sixth content block covers descriptive, narrative and expositive text superstructures. Since the concepts in this block are abstract and complicated special care is taken in the sequence of activities and the explicit use of learning strategies.

During these final 8 weeks students will need to carefully construct and analyse these three textual models in order to be able to write an appropriate simplified fourth final document with the inherent properties of an academic text.

The previous information can be summarized as follows:

Figure 1: Syllabus Contents
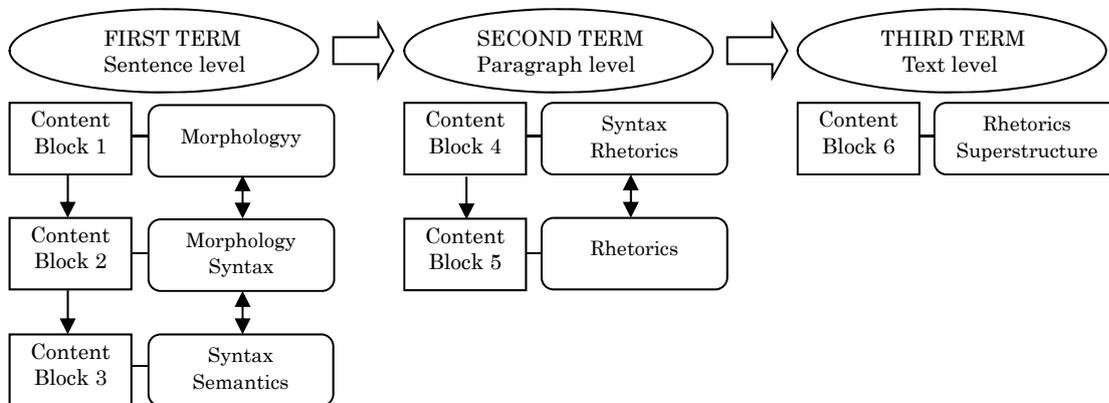
Evaluation

The evaluation system employed in this course favours fluency over accuracy since the writing is conceived as a process and not only as a product (final document). The different compositions that the students need to write are determined by this process, specially the evaluation system The next figure inspired in Benson (1995, p. 321) summarizes the writing and evaluation process in the present syllabus:

Figure 2: Evaluation Process
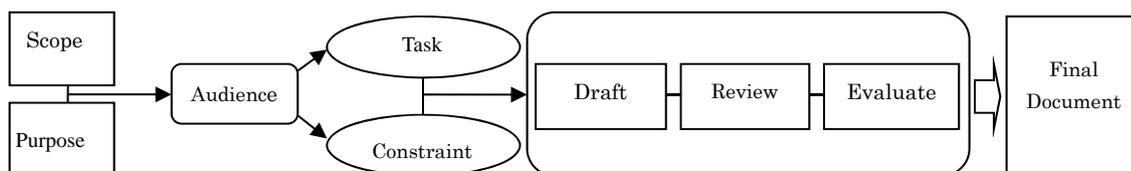
All activities and tasks that the students are expected to compose have a very special

audience: the teacher in the first place, who will evaluate informally after the first draft and formally after the final document is uploaded and all peers will be able to read it. Apart from the language itself, every task in this process is designed to foster writing skills and strategies, being the most important of them the following:

Table 1: Main Writing Skills and Strategies

Objectives selection and identification	Preparation for the writing task before writing.
Exploration/invention	Selection of topic and activation of vocabulary, mental images, etc.
Organization	Analyse and discuss main and supportive information.
Drafting	Writing according to a schema.
Compensation	Find a compensatory word when it is not remembered or known.
Self or peer editing	of activities and drafts.

As teachers we must take in account all these factors in order to evaluate adequately. Thornton (1980, p.38) suggests an interesting dual evaluation making a distinction between topic selection and grammatical accuracy, that is, the "what" and the "how". In his evaluation system there are two symbols grading one composition. If we are to adapt his evaluation system to our new environment, a plausible way of grading clearly would be topic selection on one hand and accuracy of the morphosyntactic, rhetoric or structural points of the lesson. Within this system, let us say a 1D would mean that the topic selection was diligent (number 1 being the top grade) but formal correction was not fully achieved (letter A being the top grade).

Activities

The activities employed within the Spanish Writing Course at ICU could be categorized as a) activities of sample texts produced or adapted by the teacher, b) peer and group editing, c) peer or group production of short sentences and d) individual production of a draft/final document outside the class. Activities are sequenced in such a way that the sum of all its parts conform a broader task with a determinate scope and purpose. Let's see and comment some of the activities used in the present syllabus:

First Term, Content Block 3

The following task is designed to lead to the understanding of the logical order of sentences in Spanish. The first activity involves a morphosyntactic analysis of sample texts and later writing production. Activity 2 implies peer group discussion at the sentence level and activity 3 involves writing an original short composition of the targeted language through a game.

Activity 1: Write three sentences in the sentence logic order as suggested in the examples:

Subjet		*Predicate*			
Noun	Modificator	Verb	Direct Object	Indirect Object	Circunstance
1 +	*2 +*	*3 +*	*4 +*	*5 +*	*6*
Las escuelas	*públicas*	*han ofrecido*	*su ayuda*	*a los estudiantes*	*de familia numerosa*
La madre	*de Pedro*	*(no) asistió*	*a la reunión*		
		Hemos tenido	*un serio problema*		

My examples:

1	
2	
3	

Activity 2: Try to rewrite the following sentence in the appropriate order:

	palabras	*oraciones con orden lógico*
1	estudia - de Luis - en la Universidad - la hermana - Derecho	
2	relata - en Costa Rica - la interesante vida - el diario de Yoko - de una joven japonesa	
3	numerosas felicitaciones – de su carrera– ha recibido – el profesor – a lo largo	
4	para los pequeños – tu madre – un delicioso postre – ha preparado	
5	sofocó - unas - se - en - horas - incendio - el - pocas	

Activity 3: Write two sentences in the logical order from two different words that your partners will say:

word 1   +   word 2   = sentence

Second Term, Content Block 5

The following task is designed to lead to the understanding of the definition. Activity one is a model text taken from philosopher Ortega y Gasset which students will analyse. Activity 2 involves some oral input and exemplification from the teacher. After the different rhetoric items have been fully understood students produce original definitions with their peers.

Activity 1: Read the next paragraph taken from Ortega y Gasset and identify what is being defined, how it is being defined and which language items are used to define.

> Por "masa" no se entiende especialmente al obrero, no designa aquí una clase social, sino una clase o modo de ser hombre que se da hoy en todas las clases sociales, que por lo mismo representa a nuestro tiempo, sobre el cual predomina e impera.

Defined item	Definition	Linguistic exponents

Activity 2: Select an appropriate definition for the terms in the boxes and then try to define something original. Use the following language items:

> *Se entiende por, queremos expresar con, designamos con el término...*

TOFU:	
BUDISMO ZEN:	

Third Term, Content Block 6

The following task is designed to lead to the understanding of the descriptive text model. Activity 1 is an adapted text where the term being described will be unknown even by proficient readers since it is a very unique and pre-historical building in a very particular area of Spain. The reading will involve strategies such as visualization or compensation. After analysis of the main parts of the description is done they will be able to check their overall understanding of the text through visualization in activity 2. The task culminates in a final descriptive draft that incorporates a schema.

Activity 1: Read the following text and 1) choose an appropriate title, then 2) point out the different parts that compose it in the scheme bellow.

Título:...

| El hórreo es una construcción típica del Principado de Asturias cuyos orígenes se remontan al Neolítico. Se trata de una construcción cuadrada, levantada del suelo por cuatro columnas de piedra o madera. El tejado es de forma triangular y está construido en madera, todo ello recubierto de tejas.

Se usa para almacenar grano y hortalizas, así pues, la finalidad principal del hórreo es aislar las cosechas de la humedad proveniente del suelo, así como preservarlas de los ratones y otros roedores. |
|---|

Estructura:

Identification (What is it?)	Features (How is it?)	Usage/purpose (What for is it?)

Activity 2: Which of the following buildings is an horreo?

A   B   C   D
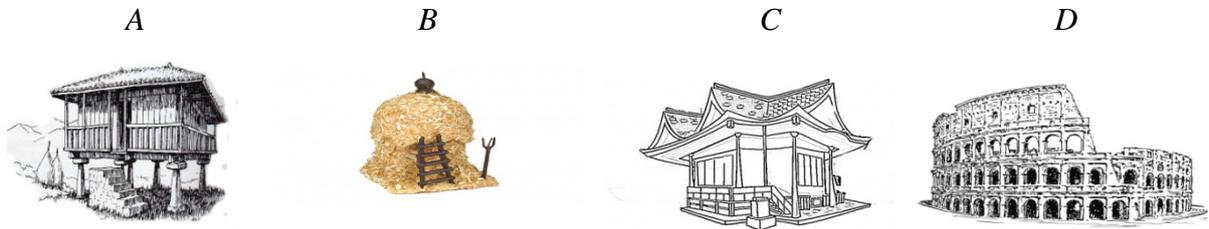
Conclusion

Through this paper we have reviewed and derived ideas from the main research, mostly contrastive rhetoric research and process-oriented research fields in writing, to create an eclectic methodology necessary to teach our group of students. It goes without saying that every educational institution has its own restrictions and that every year groups differ from previous years in some ways but many features stay intact which makes the syllabus work from year to year.

This syllabus is imperfect; it has been going through many revisions and they will go on. Adaptation to the educational environment is absolutely necessary to create an adequate teaching environment but most important of all is department communication and cooperation among teachers. The creation of this syllabus would have been unattainable without the cooperation of the ELP that generously provided us with many suggestions to reshape the Spanish writing course for ICU.

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[1] Around 90% of students are Japanese with Japanese as their L1 and English as their L2, but also some Japanese with English as their L1 and Japanese as their L2, American with English as their L1 and Japanese as their L2, and around1% of Korean, Taiwanese and Mexican students with Japanese or English as their L2, L3 language.

[2] ELP stands for English Language Program at ICU; from 2012 its name changed into ELA.

[3] The previous course in Spanish at ICU is an intensive course of 7 hours per week with a focus on oral communication mainly but also with exposure to easy readings and therefore the written code.