

Reading to Writing: Effects of Authentic Readings on Novice Spanish Students' Writing

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ABSTRACT

The current study examined the effects of authentic readings on the written production of college-level novice Spanish students, especially on content/vocabulary and text organization. The experimental and control groups had six written assignments over a 4-month period, which included a pretest and posttest to measure overall writing abilities of the participating groups. The experimental group was asked to read four different authentic texts before writing, whereas the control group completed the writing assignments without the prior reading activity. The gains of the combined dependent variables content/vocabulary and text organization were analyzed. The results of an ANOVA performed on the participants' gains in overall writing scores from pretest (Writing Assignment 1) to posttest (Writing Assignment 6) showed that authentic reading comprehension activities did not improve their writing abilities. The results of a MANOVA performed on the gains from Writing Assignment 2 to Writing Assignment 5 in terms of content/vocabulary and text organization showed no main effect for group or gender but did reveal an interaction. The reading assignment enhanced females' content/vocabulary and text organization while undercutting males' progress. Finally, the findings of the post experimental survey administered to the participants in the experimental group revealed moderately positive attitudes toward the use of authentic readings prior to the writing assignments. The gender differences revealed by this investigation warrant further and more detailed research to determine possible underlying causes.

Keywords: reading; writing; authentic materials; novice students; foreign language

INTRODUCTION

Native speakers of any language, when confronted with a writing task, will often refer to texts for background information to assist with content, vocabulary, and organization of their writing. In a similar way, language teachers should try to develop a similar behavior in their students, that is, to utilize reading texts when learning how to write in the target language. This practice is particularly important for novice students, who typically have limited knowledge of the syntax, vocabulary, content, and text organization of the target language. Consequently, instructors should make use of the suitable resources and tools they find to help learners develop the initial foundations of their writing ability. Although there are different opinions about the use of authentic texts at the novice level, there is no doubt that their use engages students in real-life situations and can serve to motivate them. The present study examined the significance of authentic reading activities in enhancing the writing of novice university students of Spanish to help them improve text organization, content, and vocabulary.

Authentic texts can help enhance beginning students' writing, in particular their text organization, content, and vocabulary. First, classes at the novice level are mainly devoted to speaking. Students are encouraged to work in pairs or groups and interact with their classmates through the use of communicative activities. Second, typically language students at the beginner level are learning how to be literate in a foreign language but have few opportunities to see authentic reading materials. Brown (2007) stated that providing authentic language in the classroom is just as relevant at novice level. Furthermore, he emphasized the goals for a beginning level course by pointing out that

reading and writing topics are confined to brief but nevertheless real-life written material.... The most important contextual factor that you should bear in mind in teaching reading and writing to beginners is their literacy level in their own native language. (p. 124)

According to Grabe and Kaplan (1996), "Reading and writing are reciprocal activities; the outcome of a reading activity can serve as input for writing" (p. 297). Hirvela (2004) affirmed that when considering reading for writing, the notion of reading should be extended:

Instead of assigning texts because of the information about a subject, we can also take into account texts' value as sources of knowledge or input about writing itself. Ideally we'll want our developing L2 writers to learn about writing itself—not just the subject at hand—through what they read. (p. 113)

Moreover, Kroll (1993) asserted that "one can read a text not only to 'learn' its content but to 'learn' choices the writers have made in producing it" (p. 72). Kroll (2001) established that texts provide models of writing in the target language the students are learning. She stated that "close reading exercises can be done to draw students' attention to particular stylistic choices, grammatical features, methods of development, makers of cohesion, and so on" (p. 225).

Additionally, Omaggio Hadley (2001) defined authentic materials as “those that were intended for use by native speakers of the language and are thus not tailored to a particular language-learning curriculum” (p. 140). She further suggested that teachers should take time to select and evaluate the right authentic material they want to use with their students as they should bear in mind their language level and prepare activities and tasks for them to work on using those materials. In addition, Rings (1986) alleged that most scholars agree that the use of authentic material in the foreign language classroom is essential and vital. She recommended the use of authentic texts with beginner students from the beginning of the semester, but added that they should be introduced with supportive material, such as pre- and post-activities. The teacher should act as the facilitator to bridge the gap that exists between the difficulty of the text and the students’ level of comprehension.

On the other hand, Omaggio Hadley (2001) stated the following regarding the development of beginning students’ writing skills:

Writing might best be viewed as a continuum of activities that range from the more mechanical or formal aspects of “writing down” on the one end to the more complex act of composing on the other. This seems most sensible in a context of foreign language learning, where beginning language students must first struggle with the transcription of speech before they can engage in more complex forms of written expression. (p. 281)

Encouraging students to persist in the effort of being in contact with authentic materials at the very early stages of language learning provides an invaluable source for building their communicative competence.

BACKGROUND

This section describes studies conducted in FL (foreign language) language classrooms where one or two of the four skills were utilized to enhance either reading or writing. These studies are relevant because they contributed to the design and focus of the present study.

Al-Jarf (2004) aimed at studying whether there were any differences in results between students who were exposed to in-class writing instructions that made use of the textbook only and those who used a combination of Web-based and in-class instructions. The students were Freshman FL students attending an American college. All the students used the same textbook, but the experimental group could make use of a Web-board where discussions were started. The students could respond by sending e-cards or group messages. They responded to other students’ threads and posted poems, stories, or comments. The students could e-mail questions to the instructor. They could also use the Internet to locate information that appeared in the book. The pretest given to both groups showed that both groups had significant problems with spelling, punctuation, and organization, yet the results of the pretest of the control group were better than the results of the experimental group. However, the results of the study showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group. The use of the Web-based instruction had a positive effect on the students’ writing ability because it motivated them. Furthermore, the study

helped the students change their attitude toward writing.

The study described previously was relevant as the students interacted among themselves and with the instructor as well. In the current research the participants interacted with the text, guided by the activities they had to work on. The predicted result was that the project would have a positive effect on text organization and content in their writings.

Pérez-Sotelo and González-Bueno (2003) also conducted a study using an experimental and a control group with students in their first semester of Spanish at an American college. The control group wrote weekly journals using paper and pencil, whereas the experimental group used e-mail. They could write about any topic that they liked. The instructors, who were the researchers, wrote comments on the writings of both groups, referring more to content than to errors. As far as correction was concerned, “the instructor’s model acted as models of accurate language, so grammatical corrective feedback was provided automatically” (p. 871). The results of the study showed that the control group outperformed the experimental group on grammatical accuracy. The researchers concluded that perhaps the use of e-mail to perform the task motivated students more, yet it did not help them make fewer grammatical errors.

Additionally, Shang (2007) conducted a study investigating the efficacy of the use of e-mail to enhance students’ writing performance. The participants were 40 nontraditional intermediate-level English students at a university in Taiwan. Nontraditional students in Taiwan are learners who are a bit older, ages ranging between 23 and 50 ($m = 32$), with more work and social experience. Both quantitative and qualitative methodologies were used. First, the participants had to read texts on various topics in class and then had to exchange ideas with another participant to gain further comprehension of the texts. The results of the quantitative study indicated that the participants showed a significant improvement with regard to sentence complexity but not with grammatical errors or density of vocabulary use. Second, the participants’ perceptions of the impact of e-mail exchanges were positive overall. They stated that they had fun and could discuss their ideas with peers, and that by doing so they could learn grammar and vocabulary. Some, however, pointed out they did not have enough time and preferred face-to-face discussions. Moreover, some students reported that they had enjoyed the e-mail project as they had improved their computer skills. Some even expressed that the electronic medium lowered their anxiety by making learning fun and authentic. The use of an authentic medium and materials is essential to making learning motivating and challenging to students so that they see the real use of communicative activities.

In another computer-related study, Smith (1990) conducted a study with 4th-semester Spanish students who worked with different computer-based writing tools. The experimental group, who used a conferencing system, exchanged ideas as well as helped others in the group with their writing activities. All messages sent could be read by all other members in the group, so they were able to interact constantly and engage in conversations. The control group, who used a word-processing program, just worked on their writings and focused more on accuracy than the experimental group, who focused more on meaning. The experimental group spent an average of 3 hours per week in online discussions, whereas the control group spent an average of

90 minutes a week. The results show that the students in the control group improved their grammatical accuracy significantly, whereas the experimental group improved their reading and writing abilities. In conclusion, it is recommended that a combination of activities be used, that is, activities directed at meaning and creativity, as well as form, so that the writing ability is enhanced.

Ruiz-Funes (1999) conducted two studies with similar characteristics in 1994 and 1996. She explored the process of reading-to-writing employed by proficient FL learners of Spanish. She examined the different processes used by the Spanish students when composing their writing, such as planning, writing, reviewing, and editing. Among the different processes she analyzed were that of synthesizing, which referred to how students planned and organized ideas; monitoring, that is, how students checked accuracy; structuring, which described the way the learners selected relevant information; and elaborating, which was related to using their creativity. The findings showed that students were aware of these processes, in particular elaboration, because they were able to integrate the information from the literary readings into their own ideas for writing.

In addition, Lee and Gail (1990) conducted a study with foreign language readers to examine the effects that text adjuncts as rhetorical structures had on reading comprehension. Text adjuncts are the titles, introductory statements, or pictures that appear in the passage that might facilitate the students' comprehension of the reading. They conducted their study in a French FL class. The study examined "the effects of providing readers with a pre-reading, rhetorically-oriented framework as a text adjunct for the purpose of facilitating comprehension" (p. 27). Two passages written for novice non-native speakers of the language were chosen. The students were randomly selected to be in one of the three different conditions: passages with no framework, minimal framework, or expanded framework. The group with no framework proceeded directly to the passage. The second group was presented with a short framework or explanation, and the third group was given the most detailed framework. The text adjuncts were written in the students' native language, and the students were allowed to write their recalls using their native language. The results of the study showed that providing an expanded rhetorical framework as a text adjunct enhanced comprehension of the text for foreign language beginner students. Furthermore, the study also indicated that providing students with a structural organization of the passage enhanced their writing and organization. This particular study indicates that if the framework is presented in the students' native language, it facilitates comprehension. In the present study the researcher used the same framework for the students' instructions. Furthermore, the authentic texts used were organized so that these helped the students put their ideas together easily.

Similarly, Asenciór (2006) conducted a study that examined the ability of college level, novice foreign language learners of Spanish to summarize and how this ability related to the rhetorical organization of the text, the participants' reading and writing abilities in the L1, and their achievements in the target language. The 31 participants in this study ranged in age from 18 to 50. They summarized two texts whose topics they had discussed in class the previous semester. The first text's rhetorical organization was comparison and contrast, and the second

text was a description. The results of the study indicate that there was no effect of rhetorical organization of the text on summary quality. Moreover, the participants' L1 literacy ability did not seem to be related to the quality of their summary. However, there was a weak relationship found between academic second-language achievement and ability to summarize.

The results of the study showed no relationship between rhetorical organization of the text or L1 reading and writing ability in summary quality because the summary writers had low L2 proficiency. On the one hand, it was speculated that the participants had difficulty getting the main ideas of the texts, as the syntax and lexis were above their level of comprehension, and therefore they could not take advantage of their background knowledge. On the other hand, it was speculated that because the subjects were familiar with the topic, they were not motivated, and, therefore, paid no attention to the rhetorical organization when summarizing. Furthermore, the relationship found between their academic achievement and summary quality added little evidence to support that proficiency was a relevant factor in summary ability. As can be seen, it is necessary to carefully select the topic of the texts and their degree of difficulty so that the students feel encouraged and motivated to use their background knowledge.

Another study by Lee (1986) examined students' use of a title and picture page to induce the correct schemata. Students were presented with two types of texts, one with a familiar topic and another with an unfamiliar topic. The results of the study showed that the use of a framework as a prereading activity helped enhance the comprehension of the familiar topic but not of the unfamiliar one. Considering the fact that the students in the present project are novice learners, Lee's study suggests that it is important to select familiar topics that have text adjuncts so as to facilitate comprehension of the passages.

A third study by Lee (2002) examined the acquisition of new vocabulary words and forms together with text comprehension in L2 readers. He based his study on learners' ability to comprehend a word's meanings without formal knowledge of its form. He worked with beginner students who had never studied the future form of Spanish verbs. One of the research questions addressed in the study referred to the frequency with which learners are exposed to forms and whether this affects comprehension and input processing; another question asked, if students are oriented to pay attention to form and meaning, does this help their input process and text comprehension? The results of the study showed a significant effect for input frequency. Moreover, the learners who were oriented with additional vocabulary words improved their form intake. The present research addresses the students' use of vocabulary words. Therefore, when choosing the passages, the frequency with which words appeared should ideally be considered to help the learners' uptake of forms and new vocabulary.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized the researcher's two university classes of novice-level students. The groups comprised true beginner and false beginner students. This study was *quasi*-experimental because the groups used for the study were already "assembled groups" (Ary, Jacobs and Sorensen, 2006, p. 26). One of the classes was the control group and the other one was the experimental group in

this study. The researcher was the class instructor in both groups. Students at the 101 level of Spanish at the university were required to write six short writings (Escrituras) throughout the semester. These were to be turned in at the end of each chapter. The Spanish 101 course used the textbook *¡Tú Dirás!*, 4th edition, which covered the first six chapters of the text. Each chapter contained related topics, vocabulary words, and grammatical points. The topics and guides for the writing assignments were housed in university's course-management system (e-learning), as devised by the Spanish Language Program.

The researcher gave both groups the same instructions regarding the format they were to follow in their writing assignments: a paragraph of no more than eight to ten lines, font 12, Times Roman. Each student was assigned a four-digit number that they used when they turned in their compositions to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. The students in the control group and the experimental group were asked to write the six required written assignments and follow the instructions the researcher gave at the beginning of the course. Additionally, the experimental group was asked to read a text related to the written topic in class with the instructor present before writing the assignment at home.

Reading (or not reading) one of the four different authentic texts before Writing Assignments 2 to 5 was the independent variable (IV) in the present study. However, there were three dependent variables (DV). The researcher compared the gains of the experimental and the control groups in terms of "overall writing skills" (DV 1) between Writing Assignment 1 (pretest) and Writing Assignment 6 (posttest). The researcher ensured that Assignments 1 and 6 were comparable in difficulty to the best of the researcher's abilities following the Spanish Language Program regulations (Appendix A). Similarly, detailed grades for two aspects of writing—the combined "content and vocabulary" (DV 2) and "text organization" (DV 3)—were available only for Writing Assignments 2 to 5. Please refer to Appendix B for a sample of a reading and writing activity the participants were administered.

The first composition assigned to the students was considered the pretest, and the researcher and three other raters used these grades to establish the base linguistic levels of both groups. No authentic reading preceded the pretest. The pretest helped the researcher determine whether there was a difference as far as language proficiency between the groups before the treatment began. The data were used for comparison when analyzing the final results of the study.

For Writing Assignments 2 to 5, the treatment consisted of having the experimental group read a short authentic text before writing each required paragraph. After the reading, students answered multiple-choice questions regarding content, vocabulary, and text organization that referred to the reading in order to raise the students' awareness to writing development in the target language. The last reading included two additional true/false statements to test comprehension because the reading was at a higher level of difficulty and to counteract the testing effect. The researcher then reviewed the answers with the students to verify their understanding of the text.

For Writing Assignment 6, both groups were asked to write the assignment following the guide housed in e-learning. Writing Assignment 6 was considered the posttest, with the researcher and the three other raters focusing on the linguistic level of the participants. This determined if the intervention had any effect on the linguistic level of the experimental group by comparing the results with the data from the pretest to see whether or not there had been any significant improvement.

ANALYSIS OF DATA AND DISCUSSION

Three levels of analysis were used in this study. The primary research question of the study was whether there was a significant improvement in the experimental group's writing due to the intervention. The first method was a two-way mixed ANOVA. The researcher analyzed the gains of the experimental and the control groups in terms of overall writing skills (DV1).

The analysis of variance that was used to test the first hypothesis considered gender as a possible independent variable in addition to the experimental reading treatment. There were 36 total participants from the experimental and control groups. Of the 36 participants, 17 were in the control group: 11 females and 6 males; the remaining 18 belonged to the experimental group: 12 females and 6 males. The students' ages ranged from 18 to 28 in the experimental group and 19 to 24 in the control group.

In general, analyses of variance are very sensitive to missing cases, particularly when they involve comparisons of small groups, and/or when large proportions of the cases in a group have missing data. Table 1 shows the number of male and female cases with missing data by writing assignment. The fact that the subgroup of male participants had more missing data, particularly in the experimental group, points to the highly tentative results for that particular subgroup.

The qualitative data collected at the conclusion of this study revealed differences between the male and female students in terms of their perception of the experimental treatment. Those differences opened the possibility of differential involvement of male and female students in the experimental activities, and differential learning effects, which had not been anticipated when the study was designed. Consequently, the analysis of the quantitative data was expanded to examine the possible moderating effects of gender.

Table 1

Male and Female Cases with Missing Data by Writing Assignment

Writings	Missing Data in Writing Assignments					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
Experimental						
Females ($n = 12$)	0	1	0	0	0	0
Males ($n = 6$)	0	0	3	3	2	1
Control						
Females ($n = 11$)	0	0	0	1	1	1
Males ($n = 6$)	0	0	2	0	0	1

The results of the ANOVA comparing the differences between the pretest (Assignment 1) and the posttest (Assignment 6) in overall writing skill are shown in Table 2: There was no main effect for group (experimental vs. control) or gender (male vs. female) and no statistically significant interaction between these two independent variables.

Table 2

ANOVA on Pretest-Posttest Differences in Overall Writing Skills: Between-Subjects Effects

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	Sig.	Effect size: Partial Eta Squared	Observed Power
Corrected Model	3	.350	.789	.035	.110
Intercept	1	.125	.726	.004	.063
Group	1	.309	.582	.011	.084
Sex	1	.721	.403	.024	.130
Group * Sex	1	.097	.757	.003	.060
Error	29				
Total	33				
Corrected Total	32				

The pretest-posttest mean differences in overall writing skills were surprising: The control group showed a very small gain of .082 points (on a 20-point scale), whereas the experimental group registered a decline of .367 points (Table 3). This finding does not necessarily mean that students' writing skills regressed in that class but suggests that the burden of extra work involved by the experimental reading assignment slowed down rather than enhanced students' progress. Moreover, the posttest was at the end of the semester, and participants could have been exhibiting fatigue.

Table 3

Comparative Pretest-Posttest Differences in Overall Writing Skills: Experimental Group Versus Control

Group	<i>Mean</i>	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Experimental (<i>n</i> = 18)	-.367	.566	-1.525	.792
Control (<i>n</i> = 17)	.082	.574	-1.092	1.256

Note. Standard error is the standard deviation of the sampling distribution of a statistic (in this case, the *mean*), or the estimate of that standard deviation, derived from the particular sample used to compute the estimate.

According to the mean differences shown in Table 4, the overall writing scores of all female participants (irrespective of the experimental condition) declined slightly from pretest to posttest by .485 points (out of 20 points), whereas the corresponding scores of the male participants rose slightly by .200 points. This finding suggests that the learning effectiveness in that particular class (irrespective of the experimental reading supplement) tended to be lower with the female students than with the male students.

Table 4

Comparative Pretest-Posttest Differences in Overall Writing Skills: Males Versus Females

Sex	<i>Mean</i>	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Male (<i>n</i> = 12)	.200	.673	-1.176	1.576
Female (<i>n</i> = 23)	-.485	.444	-1.393	.424

The mean pretest-posttest differences in overall writing scores in the experimental and control groups by gender are presented in Table 5. The results reveal comparable mean differences between experimental and control participants among males and females (.60 points for males and 1.97 points for females), with the experimental participants of both genders performing worse at posttest.

Table 5

Comparisons by Gender of Pretest-Posttest Differences in Overall Writing Skills: Experimental Versus Control

Sex	Group	<i>Mean</i>	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Male	Exper (<i>n</i> = 6)	-.150	.952	-2.096	1.796
	Control (<i>n</i> = 6)	.550	.952	-1.396	2.496
Female	Exper (<i>n</i> = 12)	-.583	.614	-1.840	.673
	Control (<i>n</i> = 11)	-.386	.642	-1.699	.926

The second method was a MANOVA. The availability of detailed scores for combined content and vocabulary (DV 2) and text organization (DV 3) for Writing Assignments 2 to 5 made it possible to conduct a more detailed investigation of gains in those two aspects of writing.

The results of the analysis of variance (MANOVA) performed on the gains from Assignment 2 to Assignment 5 in terms of content/vocabulary and text organization are presented in Table 6. There was no statistically significant main effect for groups (experimental vs. control) but there was for gender (light shading in Table 6). However, group and gender had a statistically significant interactive effect on both dependent variables (dark shading in Table 6).

The picture of score dynamics by gender is clarified in Table 7, which shows the mean changes in content/vocabulary and text organization for the males and females in the experimental and control subgroups. The male students in the experimental group registered smaller gains on both measures (.9 points on a 30-point scale on content/vocabulary and 1.0 on text organization on a 25-point scale, shaded grey in Table 7) than the control males did (5.833 points on each of the two measures, i.e., 6 times that of the experimental group). This suggests that the additional experimental reading assignment was indeed a burden for those participants and a distraction from improvement in writing. In contrast, the female students in the experimental group registered modest gains on both measures (.45 on content vocabulary and .35 on text organization), whereas the control females showed substantial declines on both measures (-4.136 points on a 30-point scale on content/vocabulary and -3.773 points on a 25-point scale on text organization, shaded grey in Table 7). The results of the female students suggest that the additional experimental reading helped them to improve their writing in terms of content/vocabulary and text organization.

Table 6

MANOVA on Content/Vocabulary and Text Organization Changes from Writing Assignment 2 to Writing Assignment 5: Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Dependent Variable	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	Sig.	Effect size: Partial Eta Squared	Observed Power
Corrected	DIFF_cv	3	7.553	.001	.447	.973
Model	DIFF_org	3	4.725	.009	.336	.850
Intercept	DIFF_cv	1	.947	.339	.033	.156
	DIFF_org	1	.806	.377	.028	.140
Group	DIFF_cv	1	.012	.913	.000	.051
	DIFF_org	1	.035	.853	.001	.054
Gender	DIFF_cv	1	11.075	.002	.283	.895
	DIFF_org	1	7.290	.012	.207	.741
Group * Gender	DIFF_cv	1	9.244	.005	.248	.835
	DIFF_org	1	5.559	.026	.166	.624
Error	DIFF_cv	28				
	DIFF_org	28				
Total	DIFF_cv	32				
	DIFF_org	32				
Corrected Total	DIFF_cv	31				
	DIFF_org	31				

These findings warrant the conclusion that the additional reading assignment administered to the experimental group had differential effects by gender: It enhanced females' progress in terms of content/vocabulary and text organization while undercutting males' progress in terms of those two measures, although the findings for the male subgroup cannot be considered conclusive because of missing data. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that these results reflect the effects of a small series of four experimental treatments. A longer series of prewriting reading assignments might yield different results.

Table 7

Comparative Gains in Content/Vocabulary and Text Organization Between Writing Assignments 2 and 5, by Gender and Experimental Condition

Dependent Variable	Sex	Group	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Gains in content/vocab	Male	Experimental	.900	1.875	-2.941	4.741
		Control	5.833	1.712	2.327	9.340
	Female	Experimental	.450	1.326	-2.266	3.166
		Control	-4.136	1.264	-6.726	-1.547
Gains in text organization	Male	Experimental	1.000	2.275	-3.660	5.660
		Control	5.833	2.077	1.579	10.087
	Female	Experimental	.350	1.609	-2.945	3.645
		Control	-3.773	1.534	-6.914	-.631

Note. Male experimental $n = 6$; male control $n = 6$; Female experimental $n = 12$; female control $n = 11$.

The availability of data from four consecutive assignments for the content/vocabulary and the text organization measures made it possible to conduct a longitudinal analysis of students' mean scores on those measures. Because this study involved grades on different writing assignments that varied in content and difficulty, it was not appropriate to compute trends. Therefore this longitudinal analysis was limited to an examination of group means generated by analyses of frequencies. Table 8 and *Figure 1* compare the experimental and the control groups on the two measures.

Table 8

Comparative Dynamics of the Experimental and Control Groups in Mean Scores on Content/
Vocabulary and Text Organization

Measure	Group	Statistics	Assign 2	Assign 3	Assign 4	Assign 5	Mean Diff (5 - 2)
Content/ vocabulary	Exper	<i>Mean</i>	22.91	19.63	24.57	23.87	0.95
		<i>SD</i>	4.46	5.08	3.14	1.95	
	Control	<i>Mean</i>	21.39	18.78	22.53	20.71	-0.68
		<i>SD</i>	6.84	6.57	4.30	3.19	
Text organization	Exper	<i>Mean</i>	19.44	17.40	22.50	20.20	0.76
		<i>SD</i>	4.92	4.47	2.03	4.04	
	Control	<i>Mean</i>	18.53	16.34	18.50	18.03	-0.50
		<i>SD</i>	5.80	5.38	5.43	4.39	

Note. Experimental $n = 18$; control $n = 17$.

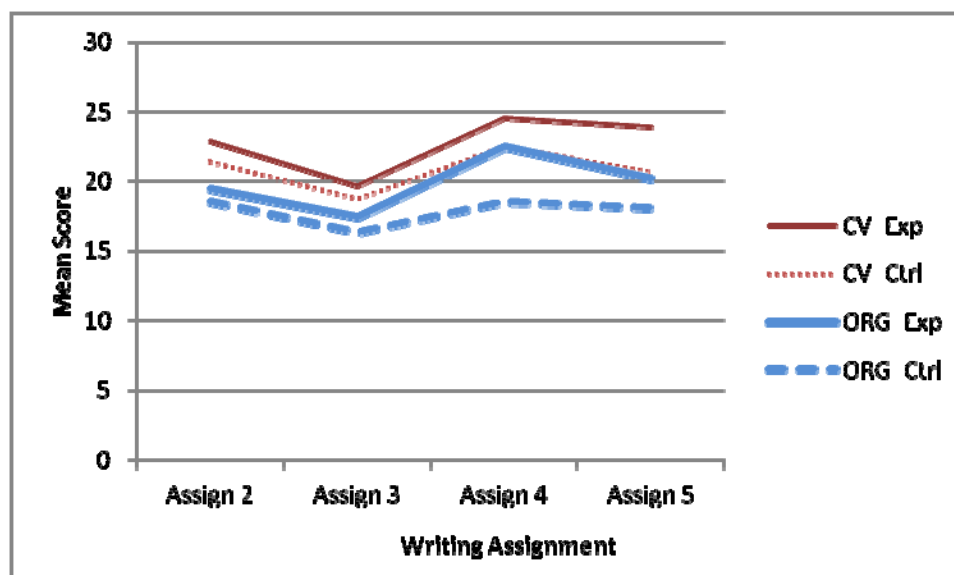


Figure 1. Dynamics of experimental and control scores on the content/vocabulary (CV) and text organization (ORG) measures.

Unlike the group means yielded by the analysis of variance, which excluded cases with incomplete data (i.e., included fewer than 36 cases in the analyses), the means obtained from analyses of frequencies (Table 8, *Figure 1*) were based on all available data, including the cases that lacked data for certain assignments. For that reason, the picture provided by means generated by analyses of frequencies can be considered more accurate. The limitation of frequency data is that they are purely descriptive, whereas the results of analysis of variance are inferential (predictive for a larger population). Consequently, the findings of the following longitudinal analysis based on frequency data are only true for the particular group of students involved in this experiment.

This longitudinal study of score means generated by analyses of frequencies provides a more positive picture (Table 8, *Figure 1*). In spite of the ups and downs in mean scores from one assignment to the next, the gains in mean scores from Writing Assignment 3 to Writing Assignment 4 are stronger for the experimental group than for the control group on both measures. In addition, the differences between the experimental and the control mean scores on both measures on Writing Assignment 5 are larger than those found on Writing Assignment 2 (indicating a divergent tendency). Also, the experimental group ended up with slightly higher mean scores on both measures (by .95 points, on a 30-point scale, on content/vocabulary and by .76, on a 25-point scale, on text organization), whereas the control group ended up with slightly lower mean scores on both measures (by .68 on content/vocabulary and .50 on text organization). These findings of the longitudinal analysis of group means generated by the analysis of frequency data indicate that the four experimental reading assignments did make a very small positive difference on the writing performance of the experimental group in terms of both content/vocabulary and text organization.

The third method of analysis was a qualitative survey administered to the experimental group at the end of the study to examine students' opinions of the study. The survey was anonymous. The researcher predicted that the learners' attitudes toward the study would be positive because the reading activities would have enhanced their writing abilities. Likert Scales (a summated rating scale) were used to assess their perceptions and opinions of the study.

The findings of the postexperimental survey administered to the participants in the experimental group revealed moderately positive attitudes toward the use of authentic reading (comprehension) tasks prior to writing assignments (Table 9 and *Figure 2*). The highest agreement was expressed relative to Item 1 (improved communication through writing as a result of authentic reading) and Item 8 (recommend reading tasks prior to writing assignments), which were the least specific in terms of the kind of benefits derived from the experimental treatment (bold in Table 9). The least agreement (*Figure 2*) was expressed relative to Item 4 (improved organization of writing assignments as a result of authentic reading), Item 5 (improved content of writing assignments), and Item 6 (improved selection of appropriate/relevant information).

Table 9

Agreement on the Eight Items: Descriptive Data

Item	Mean	SD	Minimum	Maximum
Item 1	1.059	.4287	.0	2.0
Item 2	.647	.8618	-1.0	2.0
Item 3	.824	.6359	-1.0	2.0
Item 4	.294	1.1048	-2.0	2.0
Item 5	.471	1.0073	-1.0	2.0
Item 6	.529	.7174	-1.0	2.0
Item 7	.824	.7276	-1.0	2.0
Item 8	1.059	.4287	.0	2.0

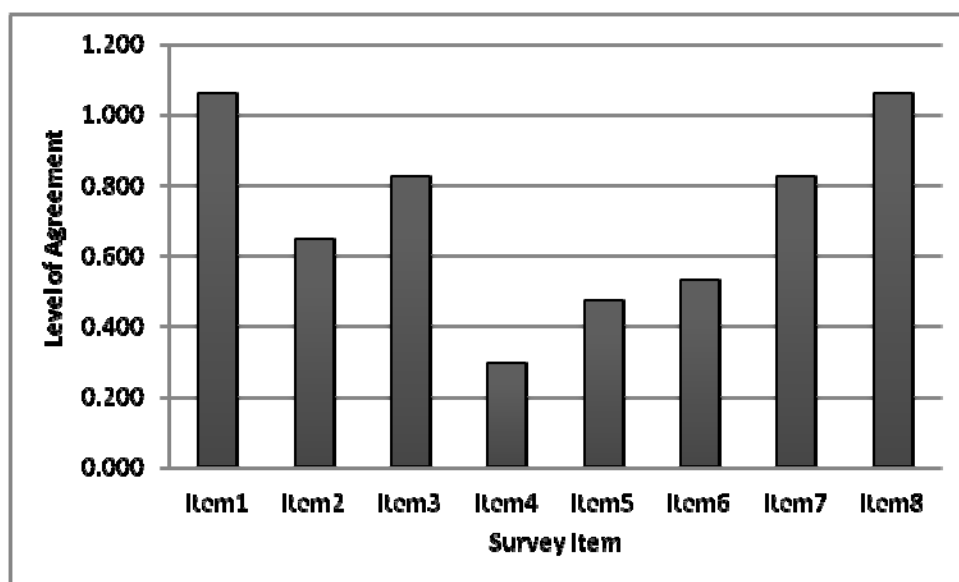


Figure 2. Participants' average agreement with the eight survey statements.

The data analysis by gender showed that the smaller subgroup of males (5 respondents) tended to be less positive (more critical) than the larger group of females (12 respondents) (Figure 3). The 5 male participants reached consensus (i.e., perfectly agreed among themselves) on Item 1 (improved communication through writing) and Item 8 (recommend reading tasks prior to writing assignments), and they disagreed the most among themselves on Item 2 (improved vocabulary), the generic Item 3 (improved writing in Spanish), and Item 4 (improved text organization).

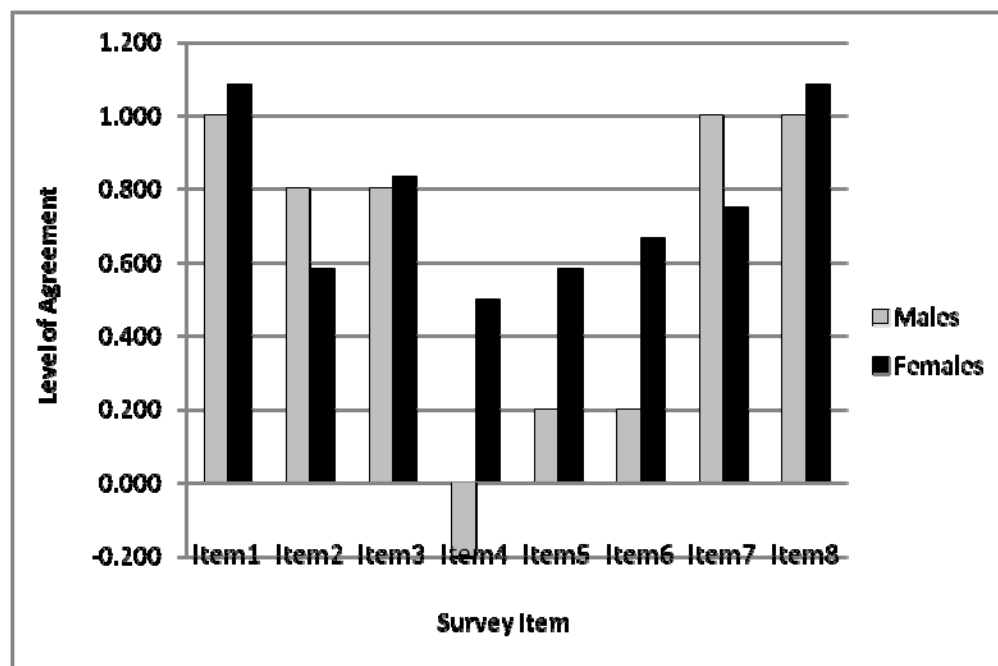


Figure 3. Males' and females' average agreement with the eight survey statements.

The larger female subgroup (12 participants) expressed higher agreement than the male subgroup on Item 1 (improved communication through writing) and Item 8 (recommend reading tasks prior to writing assignments), but lower agreement on Item 7 (improved logical order). The pattern of women's lowest agreement matched that of the male subgroup: The women's lowest values were found on Item 4 (improved text organization), although not to the extent of turning into disagreement (i.e., a negative value), Item 5 (improved content as a result of the reading tasks), and Item 6 (improved selection of appropriate/relevant information).

Limitations of the Study

The limitations of this study include the following: First, the number of participants was relatively small (less than 30 per cell, the statistical requirement for normal distribution). This limitation precludes generalizations to a larger population.

Second, the results reflect the effects of a small series of only four experimental treatments. A longer series of prewriting reading assignments might yield different results.

Third, analyses of variance are very sensitive to missing cases, particularly when they involve comparisons of small groups and/or when large proportions of the cases in a group have missing data. In this particular study the missing data (Table 1) made the results less conclusive, especially for the inferential analysis.

Fourth, the limitation of the frequencies data used in this study is that they are purely descriptive, whereas the results of analysis of variance are inferential (predictive for a larger

population). Consequently, the findings of the longitudinal analysis based on frequencies are only true for the particular group of students involved in this experiment.

Finally, students from both groups completed their writing assignments at home. Although they committed in writing to work on their own, there is no guarantee that the participants worked independently. Future studies may consider administering the writing assignments in class to ensure independent work as a prerequisite of accurate measurement of learning effects.

CONCLUSION

Implications

The present study contributes to the literature in several ways. Through a better understanding of the effects authentic reading activities have on novice language student's writing process, instructors can help beginner student's enhance their writing skills by carefully selecting these readings to serve as input for writing (Hirvela, 2004), and to engage them in real-life situations. Also, the reading assignments administered to the experimental group in the present study had differential effects by gender, enhancing females' progress in terms of content/vocabulary and text organization while undercutting males' progress in terms of those two measures. The gender-specific schemata might have intervened in the process of language learning. Consequently, it is important to remember that more information is contributed by the reader to the interpretation of a text (Clarke and Silberstein, 1977). However, each individual has his or her own pace when acquiring a language.

Recommendations

First, the results of this study are limited to novice Spanish students recruited from a college population. Similar studies with intermediate and advanced students would be useful to compare the effects of authentic readings on the improvement in writing ability at different levels of target language proficiency to incorporate the findings into the teaching of a comprehensive language program. Second, the writing assignments should be administered in class to ensure work autonomy as a necessary requirement of accurate measurements. Third, this research considered only gender as a possible moderating variable (a second independent variable). Future studies may include more variables as possible mediating factors: baseline knowledge of spoken and/or written Spanish, preexisting perceptions of the utility of reading of authentic texts for the improvement of writing skills, general and academic work loads, work styles, time and effort inputs into reading and writing tasks, personal interest in the content of each reading and writing task, and perceptions of the challenges posed by each reading and writing task.

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APPENDIX A

SP101 – Escritura

Escritura 1 Topic: La vida del estudiante

Step 1 – Organize

Look at each of the information points below and think about what you can say about your lifestyle in regard to these aspects. Then organize your ideas in a logical order.

Your professor would like to know more about you and your routine at school. Write a brief description about yourself including the following information:

- your name and place of origin
- your daily routine
- your eating habits: drinks, snacks and/or light meals

Step 2 – Write a rough draft

*Your instructor may or may not require you to turn in a rough draft.

Have you provided information for all the points addressed in the opening section? Do you need more details?

1. Is your description clear enough? Would you consider changing the organization of your description to make it clearer?
2. Have you used the appropriate vocabulary and grammatical structures that you learned in this chapter to talk about yourself and your activities and to describe different types of food?

Step 3 – Final Check

Based on the review of your draft, make the necessary adjustments and incorporate any new ideas that have occurred to you. Before you submit your composition, read it again and check for any misspelled words or phrases. Finally, make sure that all your changes have been implemented.

Escritura 6 Tema (Topic): La fiesta más divertida (The Funniest Party)

Paso 1 (Step 1): ¿Cuál fue la fiesta más divertida que fuiste? Puede ser una fiesta de Navidad, Año Nuevo, cumpleaños, aniversario o cualquier otra celebración. Considera estas preguntas: (Which was the funniest party you have been to? It can be a Christmas party, New Year party or birthday party. Consider these questions)

¿Qué fiesta fue?; ¿Dónde fue?; ¿Cuándo fuiste?; ¿Cuántas personas fueron?; ¿Con quién fuiste?; ¿Qué ropa llevaste?; ¿Qué hiciste?

(What party was it?; Where was it?; When was it?; How many people were there?; Who did you go with?; What did you wear?; What did you do?)

Paso 2 (Step 2): Escribe un borrador (Write a draft)

Paso 3 (Step 3): Chequea tu escritura (Check your writing)

APPENDIX B
Sp. 101

READING 2


The Simpsons

Open the link below, read the description of the Simpsons and choose the answer you think represents best the content, vocabulary use and text organization of the page. A scale 1 to 4 is used in the answers. Number 1 represents the highest score and 4 the lowest.

<http://cybersimpsons.110mb.com/personajes/familia.htm>

- A) Would you say that the content in the different paragraphs describing each member of the Simpson family is
- 1- Relevant and on target
 - 2- Lacks supporting detail
 - 3- Limited and not developed
 - 4- Inappropriate
- B) Would you say the paragraphs as far as text organization is concerned are
- 1- Logically and effectively ordered
 - 2- An apparent order is intended
 - 3- Lack logical sequencing of ideas
 - 4- Disconnected in meaning
- C) As far as the use of vocabulary is concerned, would you say that it is
- 1- Precise and Effective
 - 2- Adequate
 - 3- Limited
 - 4- Inadequate
- D) Would you say that the content in this family description, the organization and vocabulary used are
- 1- Very much on target
 - 2- On target
 - 3- Somewhat on target
 - 4- Off target


Copy of Reading 2




LA FAMILIA SIMPSON

En esta sección encontraréis información y algunas imágenes sobre los miembros de la familia Simpson.

[\[Homer\]](#) [\[Marge\]](#) [\[Bart\]](#) [\[Lisa\]](#) [\[Maggie\]](#)



Como todos debéis saber, la familia Simpson se compone de 5 miembros que son, por orden de edad : Homer Jay Simpson, Marge Simpson, Bart Simpson, Lisa Simpson y Maggie Simpson, que viven en una bonita unifamiliar en Evergreen Terrace 386 (Springfield). Estos son los personajes protagonistas de la serie, aunque hay más. Además, podréis ver aquí como ha evolucionado el dibujo de cada miembro de la familia Simpson. Cada uno se caracteriza por una serie de cosas, que resumiré aquí abajo :

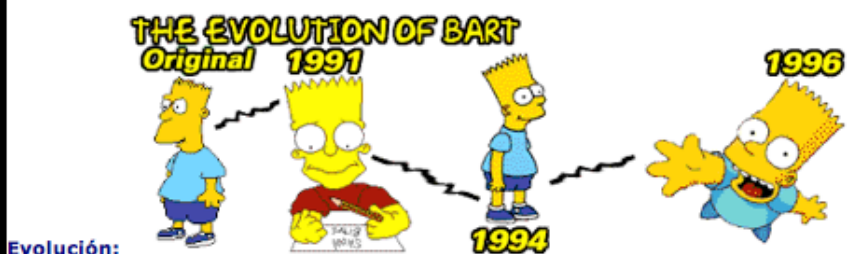
 **Homer Jay Simpson:** Es el padre de familia. Casado con Marge Simpson. Es hijo de Abraham Simpson y Penélope Olsen. Tiene 36 años. Su peso ronda por los 108-118 Kg. Tiene 1 hermanastro: Herbert Powell. Tiene 3 hijos: Bart, Lisa y Maggie. Trabaja como inspector de seguridad en central nuclear de Springfield. Ha llegado a ser de todo: Rock'N Rollero, inspector de sanidad, guardaespaldas, boxeador, y muchas cosas más. Bebe mucha cerveza, come muchas rosquillas, ve mucho la TV y se pasa la mitad del día en el bar de Moe. Su expresión más famosa es D'OH. Más información en [La sección de Homer](#). [Volver arriba](#).



Marge Simpson: Antes de casarse llamada Marge Bouvier. Hija de Jackeline Bouvier y Clancy Bouvier. Tiene 34 años. Es la ama de la casa de los Simpson. Casada con Homer Jay Simpson. Tiene 3 hijos: Bart, Lisa y Maggie. Tiene 2 hermanas : Patty y Selma Bouvier. Actualmente es ama de casa, pero ha sido policía, agente inmobiliario, humorista y más cosas. Es la que pone un poco de sentido común a las decisiones de Homer. Es muy cristiana y hace que su familia vaya todos los domingos a la iglesia. Le gusta hacer las tareas de casa, ir a la iglesia y hacer actividades y viajes familiares. [Volver arriba.](#)



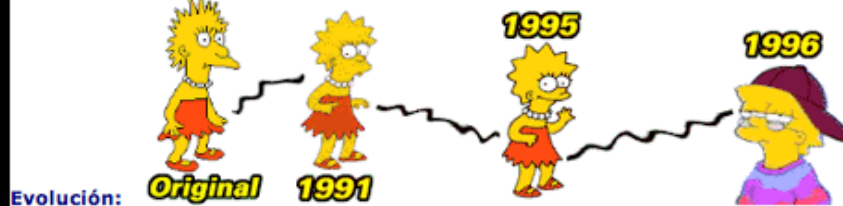
Bart Simpson: Es el hijo mayor de los Simpson. Tiene 2 hermanas: Lisa y Maggie (las dos menores que él). Tiene 10 años. Va al colegio de Springfield. Su expediente escolar es nefasto. Su mejor amigo es Milhouse. Su peor enemigo el actor secundario Bob. Ha editado "Bart Simpson: Guía para la vida", libro que ha vendido más de 350 000 ejemplares. Le gusta Skatear, hacer el gamberro, ver la TV, y ese tipo de cosas. Sus primeras palabras fueron "Ay, caramba!". Más información en [La sección de Bart.](#) [Volver arriba.](#)





Lisa Simpson: Es la mediana de los Simpson. Tiene 2 hermanos: Bart (mayor) y Maggie (menor). Tiene 8 años. Estudia en el colegio de Springfield. Tiene un expediente escolar excelente. Ha recibido varios premios escolares, como el premio al alumno más puntual, el premio al ojito derecho de la maestra, y más. Es el miembro de la familia más listo y con mayor coeficiente intelectual. Dentro de la familia Simpson es una incomprensida. Pertenece a la asociación de intelectuales de Springfield y ha ganado numerosos concursos intelectuales, como el rodeo de Gramática. Le encanta leer y hacer actividades culturales, pero por otra banda también le gusta ver el Show de Krusty y Rasca y Pica. La primera palabra que salió de su boca fue "Bart". [Volver arriba.](#)

THE EVOLUTION OF LISA



Maggie Simpson: Es la menor de la familia Simpson. Tiene 1 año. Tiene 2 hermanos: Bart y Lisa (los dos mayores que ella). Su nombre es Margaret, pero se le conoce por la abreviatura Maggie. Aún no va al colegio ni a la guardería y nunca se separa de su madre, Marge. Siempre avanza gateando, ya que aun no sabe andar, excepto algún que otro paso. Su rasgo más característico es el que siempre está chupando su chupete, nunca se separa de él, y es muy conocido el sonido que hace éste cuando ella lo chupa. En la serie ha hablado poquísimas ocasiones, pero la primera palabra que dijo fue "papá". [Volver arriba.](#)

THE EVOLUTION OF MAGGIE



Estos 5 personajes forman la familia Simpson, que para mí es la mejor de la TV y el cine, y que es tan conocida o más que otras.

Escritura 2 Topic: Self-portrait

Step 1 – Organize

In order to practice your Spanish, you decide to enroll in a pen-pal program that will match you up with an individual from a Spanish-speaking country. You're preparing to write your first email to your new pen pal and you would like to start by describing yourself. You may include the following information in your description:

- your family members
- you and your family members' physical characteristics and personal qualities
- your likes

Decide on the personal information that you would like to provide about yourself and your family members, and make a list with the details that you consider the most interesting and dislikes as well as your family's likes and dislikes

Step 2 – Write a rough draft

*Your instructor may or may not require you to turn in a rough draft.

Put the ideas from your list in paragraph form. Try to move from the more general descriptive aspects to the more specific ones.

Step 3 – Final check

1. Have you provided information for all the points addressed in the opening section? Do you need to add more details?
2. Are the ideas expressed clearly? Would you consider changing the organization of your description to make it clearer?
3. Have you used the vocabulary and grammatical structures that you learned in this chapter to describe yourself and your family members and to express likes and dislikes?