Writing in business courses: an analysis of assignment types, their characteristics, and required skills

Wei Zhu*

Department of World Language Education, University of South Florida, CPR 107, 4202 East Fowler Avenue, Tampa, FL 33620-5550, USA

Abstract

This study categorized writing assignments required in undergraduate and graduate business courses and examined the characteristics of as well as skills needed for completing the assignments. Data sources included 95 course syllabi and handouts on writing assignments, 12 student writing samples, and six interviews with business faculty. Data analysis indicated that writing assignments required of students encompassed both general academic and discipline specific genres. Further, analysis of the disciplinary genres indicated that they were problem-solving oriented, were designed to initiate students into the real business world, and required students to utilize a variety of problem-solving tools and information sources. Data analysis also indicated that performing the disciplinary genres required strong analytical, problem-solving, persuasive, rhetorical, and teamwork skills. Implications of the findings for EAP writing instruction are discussed.

© 2002 The American University. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Over the last 20 years, research on writing in academic contexts has examined the types and nature of writing tasks students encounter in university classrooms. This line of research is both pedagogically and theoretically motivated. At the pedagogical level, writing researchers and teachers hope to better understand second language students’ writing needs in order to better prepare them for academic writing...
tasks. Task analysis as a means of identifying students’ writing needs has received much attention in research conducted in the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) context. At the theoretical level, writing researchers hope to better understand the nature of communicative conventions in different discourse communities as well as student acquisition of those conventions. Examining the purposes and features of writing tasks is seen as a means to understand the discursive practices in different communities, the values associated with those practices, and student socialization into discourse communities.

Earlier research on writing tasks tended to encompass assignments from different academic disciplines and favored the survey methodology (e.g. Bridgeman & Carlson, 1984; Casanave & Hubbard, 1992; Eblen, 1983; Johns, 1981; Kroll, 1979; Ostler, 1980). While survey studies provided useful information on the types of writing assignments required in university classrooms, their results were sometimes difficult to interpret due to the methodology used. For example, researchers often provided pre-determined categories of writing assignments (e.g. term paper, essay, book review) and asked the respondents, often faculty members in content areas, to indicate which categories of writing tasks were assigned. One potential problem with this methodology is that terms used by the researchers to refer to the writing assignments might be interpreted differently by survey respondents, as Braine (1995) points out. As a result, it is not clear to what extent tasks reported in the studies accurately represented those actually required in the classroom.

More recent research has focused on tasks from a single discipline or from a few selected disciplines (e.g. Braine, 1989, 1995; Carson, 2001; Hale et al., 1996). The difference in disciplinary focus can be seen as a reflection of a difference in the theoretical orientation of the studies. According to Braine (1995), “this shift in focus is based on the assumption that separate disciplines are singular discourse communities with their own writing conventions” (p. 114). Consequently, analysis of writing tasks has aimed at identifying, describing, and contextualizing the genres that students are expected to perform in different discourse communities, which are defined as the “group(s) of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated” (Porter, 1986: 38–39). This goal to understand genres students need to perform in different discourse communities is reflected in the research methodologies chosen. Researchers have examined what Hodder (1998) refers to as “mute material evidence” (e.g. classroom artifacts related to the writing tasks) and some have also conducted interviews with faculty and students (e.g. Carson, 2001). Some researchers (e.g. Braine, 1989, 1995; Carson, 2001; Hale et al., 1996) adopted and extended Horowitz’s (1986) inductive approach to analyzing writing tasks, which is characterized by first collecting information on writing assignments and then deriving categories of writing tasks based on analysis of the information gathered. For example, Braine (1995) analyzed 80 handouts collected from professors teaching courses in science and technology and identified five genres “based on their instructional specifications, required task(s), and organization” (Braine, 1995: 119): summary/reaction, experimental report (lab), experimental report (design), case study, and research paper. In another study, Hale et al. (1996) adopted a similar approach but used a more
comprehensive classification scheme. This study is perhaps one of the most extensive thus far, involving analysis of writing tasks from 162 courses offered in several disciplines at eight universities. What distinguished these studies from the early ones is that classifications of writing tasks are grounded in the analysis of actual materials on writing.

Research on writing in academic contexts has also examined the functions of writing, the context for writing, and the role writing plays in helping students learn the discourse practices of a community (Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman 1991; Herrington, 1985; Prior, 1998). For example, Herrington (1985) examined the nature of writing tasks in two chemical engineering classes, which she called Lab and Design, respectively. Utilizing a variety of research methods, including open-ended and discourse-based interviews, class observations, student and faculty surveys, and analysis of student written products, Herrington found that the two classes functioned as two discourse communities, with the Lab as a “school forum” and Design as a “professional forum”. In these two forums, writing served different purposes, and writers assumed different roles, wrote for different audiences, and used different types of warrants to support their claims. Herrington’s findings showed that “writing can function as a way of introducing students to what it means to think and act in various disciplinary forums” (pp. 354–355).

Much research on academic writing tasks has focused on science and engineering (e.g. Braine, 1989, 1995; Jenkins, Jordan, & Weiland 1993; West & Byrd, 1982), although as a field of study, business is the most popular among international students in the United States and attracts 20.9% of all international students, more than any other field of study (Davis, 1998). In one of the often cited studies on business writing, Canseco and Byrd (1989) analyzed 55 course syllabi from 48 different graduate business courses and identified seven types of assignments: exams, written responses to problems, projects, case studies, papers, reports, and miscellaneous assignments. Their analysis offered useful information on business writing assignments and revealed that writing assignments in business courses often required teamwork and were controlled by the instructors. However, because assignments were categorized based on terms used in the syllabi and because descriptions of the different types of writing assignments were not provided, it is not clear in what ways, for example, a project was different from a report.

Research from Business Communication, an interdisciplinary field devoted to research pertaining to business communication practices and instruction, has shed considerable light on various aspects of spoken and written communication in the business world and classroom. Research published in the last ten years in the two major outlets of business communication research, namely Business Communication Quarterly and The Journal of Business Communication, focused on several areas, including (a) faculty and students’ perceptions of students’ communication needs in terms of students’ strengths and weaknesses in writing and the tasks expected of them in the real business world (e.g. Epstein, 1999; Plutsky, 1996; Reinsch & Shelby, 1997); (b) business communication instruction and standards in MBA and undergraduate business programs (e.g. Bogert & Butt, 1996; Knight, 1999); (c) faculty vs. business professionals’ perceptions of several aspects of student writing (e.g. Leonard
& Gilsdorf, 1990; Seshadri & Theye, 2000); and (d) effects of instruction on
certain aspects of writing (e.g. Campbell, Brammer, & Ervin, 1999). Business
communication research has provided a wealth of information on various aspects
of written business communication, yet relatively little research has been devoted
to systematic analysis of writing tasks required in business courses, although
researchers have compiled lists of writing assignments expected of students by
using terms from course syllabi collected (e.g. Bogert & Butt, 1996). However,
the need to better understand business writing assignments has certainly been
recognized, as reflected in the recent research on the “case write-up” (e.g.
Forman & Rymer, 1999) and its related case method (Dorn, 1999; Rogers &
Rymer, 1998).

The study reported in this article examined writing assignments in undergraduate
and graduate business courses by analyzing faculty descriptions of and guidelines on
writing assignments, student writing samples, and faculty interviews. Its purpose is
twofold: (a) to perform task analysis to understand students’ “target needs”
(Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, cited in Jordan, 1997) in business classrooms, and (b)
to contribute to an understanding of discursive practices in business courses. Two
related questions were examined:

1. What types of writing assignments are required of students in undergraduate
   and graduate business courses?
2. What are the characteristics of the major types of assignments, and what
   knowledge and skills are needed to complete the assignments?

In the following sections, I will describe the data collection and analysis proce-
dures, report the findings, and discuss the potential implications of the findings for
future research and instruction.

2. Methodology

The study reported in this article took place at a large research university in
the Southeast of the United States, which enrolls approximately 36,000 students.
The College of Business Administration at the university is accredited by the
International Association for Management Education and offers various bachelor’s,
master’s and doctoral degrees. It has six departments: Management, Marketing,
Economics, Accounting, Finance, and Information Systems.

Writing requirements for undergraduate business degrees at the university include
6 h of English Composition and 3 h of Professional Writing or Expository Writing
or the equivalent. None of these courses are offered by the College of Business
Administration. In addition, to satisfy Liberal Arts Exit requirements, students need
to take 6 h in Major Works and Major Issues, where writing is strongly encour-
aged, and 3 h in Literature and Writing. There is no separate writing course
required of graduate students, and writing is integrated into the graduate business
course work.
2.1. Data

Unlike studies that examined only handouts on writing assignments, the present study included handouts as well as course syllabi for analysis. The course syllabi examined in this study all met one criterion: they had to contain information about writing assignments so that the assignments could be analyzed. In fact, many of the course syllabi analyzed not only included descriptions of writing assignments but also provided guidelines for completing the assignments and criteria for evaluating the finished written products. Further, many of the course syllabi contained information about the classroom context in which roles of the students and the professors were defined, and rules concerning certain procedures (e.g. firing a team member) were spelled out. Such information provided insight into the nature of the writing assignments.

This study analyzed 95 course syllabi and handouts on writing assignments from undergraduate and graduate courses offered in the Management, Marketing, Economics, Accounting, Finance, and Information Systems programs. The syllabi and handouts covered courses offered from the Fall 1998 to Fall 2000 semesters, and syllabi/handouts from the different sections of the same course were included only when the sections were taught by different professors. Table 1 summarizes the number of syllabi and handouts analyzed by program area and level of instruction. Because the general business courses integrated content taught in the six programs, assignments required in these courses were placed under the “Other” category in Table 1. The 40 undergraduate syllabi/handouts covered 31 different courses, and the 55 graduate syllabi/handouts covered 45 different courses.

A syllabus may contain multiple writing assignments. As in Horowitz (1986) and Braine (1995), only take-home assignments were included for analysis in this study. Within take-home assignments, homework, exercises, and problem sets were excluded from analysis because they did not seem to demand as much writing or the same type of writing as other assignments. As summarized in Table 2, the present study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Undergraduate</th>
<th>Graduate</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information systems</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>40</strong></td>
<td><strong>55</strong></td>
<td><strong>95</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
analyzed a total of 242 assignments, 88 from undergraduate courses and 154 from graduate courses. The majority of the assignments analyzed at the undergraduate level came from junior and senior level courses.

Other sources of data were also collected and examined. These included 12 student writing samples, six with instructor feedback; handbooks or portions of the textbooks required or recommended for students on writing assignments (e.g. Kotler, 1997; May & May, 1999); records of discussions with four business professors following my examination of their syllabi/handouts and/or student writing samples to request clarifications and/or to check my understanding of the writing tasks; and transcripts of five “qualitative interviews” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) with business faculty members. One of the four professors with whom I held a follow-up discussion also participated in the interviews described below. Six business faculty members, one from each of the six departments, were interviewed. Four (those in Management, Accounting, Economics, and Information Systems) were teaching at the graduate level and two (those in Marketing and Finance) at the undergraduate level at the time of the interviews. All were familiar with writing requirements in their respective program areas at the level they were teaching. The interviewees were selected because their experience and knowledge of their programs would allow them to provide useful information on student writing. Five interviews were tape-recorded with permission and transcribed. One interview was not recorded due to technical problems, but I took quite detailed notes during the interview. Conducted during the Fall 1999 and Spring 2000 semesters, the interviews lasted from 30 to approximately 60 min. An interview guide was prepared in advance, but follow-up questions were asked as necessary to probe for further information, to clarify meaning, and to confirm my understanding of faculty responses. The major questions asked during the interviews dealt with (a) the type(s) of writing assignments required of students, (b) faculty perceptions of students’ writing skills, (c) the professor’s role in helping students develop academic writing skills, and (d) the place of writing in the course, program, and field.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Undergraduate</th>
<th>Graduate</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information systems</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>242</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

Number of assignments analyzed by program and instructional level
2.2. Analysis

The syllabi and handouts were analyzed to identify major genre types of writing assignments. I followed the same inductive approach that Horowitz (1986), Braine (1995), and Hale et al. (1996) adopted in their studies. That is, categories of writing assignments and their descriptions were derived from the analysis of the materials, with no predetermined categories imposed on the data. Similar to Braine (1995), I considered the overall purpose of an assignment, the specific tasks entailed by the assignment, and the structural elements of the (expected) written product in deriving the genre type. Specifically, the “constant comparative” method (Hodson, 1991; Huberman & Miles, 1998) was used. The categories finally derived were results of a process that was marked by constant examination and revision of the categories already identified. Preliminary categories were established with a portion of the syllabi/handouts, and upcoming assignments were compared with those already placed in the categories for similarities and differences. This process led to modification of existing categories as well as creation of new ones and continued until all assignments were categorized. For example, one of the earlier categories established was “Summary/Critique/Analysis of Multiple Readings.” Comparison of the assignments placed in this category indicated that although they all required students to use multiple sources, some required an overview of research literature on a topic while others required students to propose specific solutions to or recommendations for approaching business problems. There seemed to be differences in organization and purpose. As a result of this comparison and after discussions with business faculty, I took those assignments which required students to provide specific business solutions out of the original category and placed them under a new category labeled “business report.” Those assignments that required essentially a literature review were categorized as “library research paper.” The “business report” category was later expanded to include assignments which required students to solve specific business problems based on analysis of information collected through primary as well as secondary sources. During the process of identifying genre types, efforts were made to understand the insider’s “emic” perspective on the writing assignments to inform the researcher’s “etic” interpretation of the materials collected. As mentioned above, I contacted four business faculty members to request clarifications on business writing assignments, and their input facilitated the analysis process.

The syllabi, handouts on writing assignments, interview transcripts, records of follow-up discussions with faculty members, and writing samples were also examined for the characteristics of major business assignments. Again, the approach to data analysis was iterative and inductive, with the materials examined repeatedly and the characteristics emerging from the data. Skills needed to complete the major assignments were also identified. Following Hale et al. (1996) and Carson (2001), I examined the collected materials for the cognitive skills needed as well as the rhetorical modes entailed in the assignments; definitions of cognitive skills and categories of rhetorical modes from Hale et al. (1996) and Carson (2001) were applied. The skills reported here were not intended to constitute an exhaustive list of all micro-skills needed but were those that were inferred based on the examination of the
syllabi, handouts, and writing samples and those that were noted by professors during the interviews and/or discussions.

3. Results

Question 1. What types of writing assignments are required of students in undergraduate and graduate business courses?

Nine genre types of assignments emerged through repeated examination of the syllabi/handouts, with seven categories each containing at least ten assignments. Assignments that did not fall under any of the nine categories were placed into the “Miscellaneous” category; they were mostly minor assignments such as website analysis, report of an on-line survey, or report of some kind of participatory experience. Table 3 summarizes the types of assignments identified and the number of each type by instructional level. As reflected in the table, writing assignments in business courses encompassed genres that research (e.g. Horowitz, 1986) has shown to be employed across academic disciplines, such as the article/book report/critique, the reflection paper, and the library research paper, and genres that are more specifically connected to the business discipline, namely business genres such as case analysis, business report, business proposal, design report, and business letter and memo. Case analysis was the category with most assignments (79), followed by article/book

Table 3
Types of business writing assignments by instructional level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Undergraduate</th>
<th>Graduate</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Case analysis</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Article/book report</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business report</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business proposal</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design project</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library research</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection paper</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Letters and memos</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research proposal/paper</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miscellaneous</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>88</strong></td>
<td><strong>154</strong></td>
<td><strong>242</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Terms used in this study to refer to the genres may not correspond to those used by the professors in their syllabi or handouts. For example, the business proposal category included what professors labeled as “business plans” and “marketing plans.”

2 Different terms have been used in existing studies to refer to the more common academic genres identified in this study. The case analysis assignment reported in this study refers to the written assignment specifically associated with the case method used in business schools, although case analysis is also used in disciplines other than business, as reported in some studies (e.g. Braine, 1995; Horowitz, 1986).
report (56), and business report (30). This pattern was observed at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Below are descriptions of the genre types identified.

3.1. Article/book report/critique

This type of assignment centered around a single source of reading, namely an article or a book. Students could choose an article or a book or they could be assigned a particular reading. The tasks entailed not only summarizing the contents of the reading but also analyzing the source material. Also, students could be asked to discuss how the reading related to concepts covered in the course and what insights they had gained by reading the article or book.

3.2. Library research paper

This type of assignment focused on a topic or issue and asked students to address the topic or issue through synthesizing information from multiple sources of reading. The product was often a review of literature on a specific topic (an overview) or a discussion of specific aspects of an issue.

3.3. Reflection/reaction paper

This type of assignment asked students to reflect on an issue or topic, to make connections between topics covered in the course and issues in the real-world, or to apply business concepts and theories to the explanation of a specific business phenomenon. This type of assignment could be completed based on information gleaned through course readings, news items, or some participatory experience (e.g. students might be asked to interview business people and discuss, based on the interview, how certain issues covered in the course were handled in the business world).

3.4. Research proposal/paper

This represented the empirical research assignment in which students were asked to present the research topic and questions, review related research literature, describe research methodology, and if the students had carried out the research, report the findings and discuss the results.

More elaborate descriptions are provided below for four business genres—case analysis, business report, business proposal, and design projects—not only because they were specifically connected with the business discipline but also because they were assigned often or carried significant weight. Together, these genres accounted for 55% of the assignments analyzed. Case analysis, closely associated with the case method widely used in business education, was the type of writing most often assigned. Business proposals, business reports, and design projects, although fewer in number, could account for up to 80% of a student's course grade. Descriptions of
these major business genres contain the general features of the tasks as well as their main structural elements. Tasks and structural elements in these genres could vary depending on the specific assignment.

3.5. Case analysis

The cases presented “actual business situations” (Wheelen & Hunger, 1986: 28) and required students to apply business concepts, theory, and knowledge to the analysis of business problems and business decision-making processes. Students were often provided the cases but were encouraged to use outside sources to aid their analysis. While case analysis could be organized and presented in different ways, the following components were often expected by business professors:

- an analysis of the current situation
- an identification/summary of key issues or problems
- an analysis and evaluation of alternative approaches to solving the problems
- a discussion of specific recommendations for solving the problems
- a justification/support for proposed solutions

3.6. Business report

The business report was the most flexible in terms of its focus and scope in all the business genres analyzed in this study. Business reports could center on a situation, a company or a unit in a company, an issue, or a procedure, and require students to gather information from primary and/or secondary sources, analyze the information, and make recommendations concerning business practices based on the analysis. More specifically, students could be asked to (a) describe the situation, problem, or company, (b) analyze the collected information to identify the key issues and causes of the problem(s), and (c) make recommendations for problem solving. Or, students could be asked to identify different views on an issue or to evaluate a procedure and then make recommendations or propose strategies for future action. Although many business reports (e.g. those that focused on a company) were similar to case analysis in terms of their structural elements, they nevertheless required students to collect information and present the case (instead of giving students the case) before performing analysis. Data for business reports could come from a variety of sources, including books, journals, the Internet, company publications, and interviews of company personnel or other informants. Business reports often contained these elements:

- an executive summary stating the purpose of the report and summarizing its main points for the reader; this summary preceded the full text of the report
- an identification of the issue(s) to be addressed along with a discussion of necessary background information and the organizational framework of the report
3.7. Business proposal

This type of assignment asked students to focus on a particular company, a product, or a service. In some assignments, students were expected to propose strategies (strategic planning and/or operational strategies) for a new or existing business; in others, they were instructed to focus more on marketing issues. Students were expected to describe and analyze the business/marketing situation, identify the specific goals and/or objectives of the company or the marketing program, and present strategies to be adopted to achieve the proposed goals and/or objectives. Business proposals might require students to integrate knowledge acquired from several business areas (e.g., marketing, management, finance, etc.) and contained some distinctive elements. The following elements were found in assignments in the “business proposal” category; the order in which they were presented could vary somewhat:

- a summary of the proposal (executive summary); this summary might include a brief description of the company and/or the product and a discussion of the key issues and recommendations
- a statement of the vision/goals of the company and/or the objectives of the marketing program
- a description and analysis of the situation, product, or service (e.g. market analysis, industry analysis, product analysis, competitor analysis, financial analysis, opportunity and issue analysis in “business plans”). The analysis could be done in different sections
- a discussion of key strategies (e.g. marketing, management, financial, and information technology strategies in “business plans”) and a discussion of the specific steps (action plans) to be taken to achieve the proposal’s objectives (what would be done, when and how it would be done, who would do it, what would be the cost, etc.)
- a projection of sales and expenses
- a discussion of how the proposal’s success would be evaluated (this could be included as part of the action plan)

3.8. Design project

This type of assignment asked students to focus on a business information system, database, or network. Students were often instructed to assess the needs or identify the problem(s) of the system, database, or network through integrating and analyzing information collected from, for example, interviews or existing documents or, occasionally, through interpreting program/system requirements provided by the
course instructor. The students could then be asked to design a new system or make recommendations to improve the existing one. The students might also be required to justify design decisions, run the program, and evaluate it.

Specific elements could vary from assignment to assignment, and they might not be presented exactly in the same order; however, the elements often expected included:

- an executive overview/summary
- a description of the business for which the system, database, or network was being developed
- an identification of the needs/problems of the system through analyzing collected information or interpreting project requirements when provided by the professor
- a discussion of the assumptions and business rules that were addressed
- a specification and presentation of the proposed design using graphics and disciplinary specific language
- a justification of the design choices made or implementation plan proposed

A few assignments also required students to write a user’s manual and provide a budget and a schedule.

Another business genre, which was required mostly of undergraduate accounting students, was comprised of two specific types: the letter and memo.

3.9. Letter and memo

Assignments involving these types of writing represented inter-and intra-organization business correspondence concerning business issues and practice. Letters and memos might contain research summaries concerning specific business issues, responses to questions previously raised, recommendations concerning business practice, or explanations of business policies or procedures.

Question 2. What are the characteristics of the major types of assignments, and what knowledge and skills are needed to complete the assignments?

This section focuses on four genres specifically connected to the business discipline (hereafter referred to as business genres): case analysis, business reports, business proposals, and design projects, although all business genres will be discussed. Several characteristics of the business genres were observed during the data analysis process.

First, the business genres had a strong problem-solving and decision-making orientation. Students were often asked to solve business problems and make recommendations for business decisions based on an understanding of business principles and an analysis of information either provided in course materials or collected for the purpose of an assignment. Further, students were expected to solve the problems and make recommendations for business decisions in team environments. 67% of the business reports, business proposals, design projects, and case
Second, a major function of the business genres was to socialize students into the business world. An important purpose of the business genres was to prepare students for real-world tasks by allowing students opportunities to develop and sharpen skills needed for functioning in the real business world (e.g. team work skills, business problem-solving and decision-making skills, and business communication skills). This purpose was reflected in the rationale faculty provided for the writing assignments, which indicated that efforts were made to align business writing assignments with real-world tasks. For example, the Accounting professor interviewed said that undergraduate accounting students were no longer asked to write library research papers because library research papers did not represent what accountants would be expected to do in the real world. Instead, students were asked to perform more realistic tasks such as writing memos and letters. Similarly, the Economics professor gave ‘preparing students for real-world tasks’ as the reason behind the assignment when he commented on the graduate economics project that emphasized analyzing data and writing up the results. The project was required because “most of our students go into jobs that are of somewhat technical nature where they are serving as an economist or statistician in a government agency or a private business firm or a consultant firm. So they would perform research and then write up the results...They are serving in the role of performing research and writing up the results” (Interview 3, p. 3).

That business genres were utilized to initiate students into the business world was also reflected in the fact that from the professors’ perspective, a successful business written product would mark the professional status of a student, i.e. that it would embody the student’s professional qualifications and readiness as a business professional. It thus served to ease a student’s entry into the business world. For example, when describing the purpose of a marketing plan assignment in a handout, one instructor wrote that “students will have a tangible, professional [italics added] product to show to prospective employers” (Handout 11). Further, the purpose of preparing students for real-world tasks was evident in faculty instructions on the writing assignments. For example, one professor wrote in a syllabus of an undergraduate marketing class that the case analysis assignment “simulates real-world problems you will confront as a marketing professional” (Syllabus 34). Although the case analysis assignment, connected with the case method widely used in business education, represented more of a “pedagogical genre” (Johns, 1997), it is nevertheless intended to give business students “a feel for what it is like to work in a large corporation and be faced with making a business decision” (Wheelen & Hunger, 1986: 29). The other business genres seemed to represent more the “professional genres” that business people would perform in the real world, and these genres served to socialize students into the business world through creating a context in which students took on business roles, wrote for business audiences, and employed business communication strategies.

Because business genres aimed at preparing students for real-world tasks, they provided opportunities for students to assume corresponding social roles, namely
roles as business professionals. Some of the specific business roles students assumed included marketing researchers, business consultants, security analysts, loan officers, and employees within companies. To assist students in performing these roles, some professors assigned consultants/mentors to the students. For example, in an undergraduate Finance course, the professor assigned a mentor (a security analyst) to each student team working on a course project and required each team to present the results of its project to the mentor. Congruent to their assuming business roles, students were instructed to target the intended business audience in their assignments. The business audience was often described by faculty as highly critical people who needed specific information to make business decisions, such as clients, supervisors, investors, members of boards of directors, and owners of businesses. When working on a particular business assignment, students were urged to keep a specific audience in mind and to address issues particularly relevant for the chosen audience. For example, for a business plan assignment, students could aim at one of several different audiences, each with particular interests and questions, depending on the nature of the business discussed. One professor with whom I had a follow-up discussion on the business plan assignment identified several types of audiences and the major issues associated with each:

We generally have three distinct groups of people we have got to present them [business plans] to: One, if the students are called in to be management consultants, they are talking to the management of the firm, president, chief executive officer, chief operating officer, whoever is in charge of operating the firm. In that case, as I said, it generally says, A) Here are your problems, B) Here are our solutions, C) Here is what we think will be the results if you implement our solutions. The second major group is venture capitalists, or people with money that the proposals try to entice them to invest. That would have different major hot buttons, that would be how much return we expect to get, how much they need to invest, how many risks are involved… There are different points, these are different audiences. The third major audience would be the loan officer of a bank. The team is presenting a plan to get a loan from a bank officer. And that is basically how much we need, how we intend to repay, different points, because the loan officer has a different perspective…different set of very important purpose than the other two. And sometimes we get elements that are non-profit, we may get YMCA and other types of situations in which the emphasis would be on community involvement measures, social measures, utilization measures, scheduling, routing… Non-profits will have a slightly different focus than profits. So you have to tailor to the specific audience, but you never lose the communication style… (Follow-up Discussion 3)

This professor referred to audience consideration as “the most important consideration for the business plan.”

Pressing the appropriate “hot buttons” is necessary but not sufficient to achieve effective business communication. Communicating to a business audience entails the employment of a style and strategies appropriate for the business audience, who
“are used to communicating quickly, efficiently, accurately, to the point” (Follow-up Discussion 3). The style students were instructed to adopt was characterized by conciseness, directness, and attractive document design aimed at presenting information efficiently and effectively. For example, in a handout on management plans, a professor urged students to go to the point directly and grab their reader’s attention right away, to be brief, and to use lists, charts, and “visually interesting devices.” Students were specifically warned against the “term paper look” of their reports (Handout 13). More specifically, this style of communication distinguished itself by short paragraphs, bulleted items, lists, headings and subheadings, and visual devices for presenting information such as tables, charts, graphs, and color graphics. One professor, in a set of guidelines on a business proposal, stated that “color graphics must be used” (Syllabus 90). What was to be achieved through this style was “to communicate efficiently with great impression” (Follow-up Discussion 3), and efficiency and impression were considered essential to effective business communication. Impressions, however, “are not made with pages and pages of words. One picture is worth 1000 words. And two pictures are worth 10,000 words” (Follow-up Discussion 3). The emphasis on impression means that “showing” rather than simply “telling” plays an important role in the style desirable for business communication. It also suggests that the academic style many students have developed in writing classes might not be very effective for performing some business genres. The Finance instructor I interviewed said:

If you write these huge volumes, like you do in your English class or whatever, you are going to bore your audience to tears and you are not going to be effective...you have to write in such a way as to gain attention and keep attention, and has to be short, sweet, and simple. On the other hand, it has to lead them by the hand through every aspect of the business. (Interview 5, p. 3)

Assuming business roles, writing for business audiences, and adopting business communication styles represented ways in which students were initiated into real-world tasks. Such initiation, however, did not constitute the sole purpose of the business genres. Because of the larger context in which business assignments were performed, it was not surprising that business genres also served institutional purposes simultaneously. For example, the business plan assignment discussed earlier served dual purposes: “to incorporate the applications of material learned in the course, and to actually work with realistic problems” (Follow-up Discussion 3). Because of the former purpose, students “must demonstrate they have the application of the knowledge, the ability to apply all [italics added] they have learned” (Follow-up Discussion 3). Clearly, the assignment also served an institutional purpose (i.e. covering course material and documenting student learning), and because of this purpose, the products were “much more developed and full-blown, have more academic orientation...because we want to make sure that every area that the business student has encountered in their MBA career until this time is in their course project,” although “if you look at just the essentials, it would be virtually identical to what’s out there in the real world” (Follow-up Discussion 3). What this suggests is that...
when performing a course assignment, even if the assignment aims at initiating students into their business roles, students still need to assume their institutional role—as learners who have learned all the material and who need to display their learning.

Another characteristic of business genres was an emphasis on persuasion in many assignments, i.e. students were urged to persuade their reader into seriously considering the solutions and/or strategies they proposed. This emphasis was reflected in instructions professors provided on assignments. For example, one professor wrote in a handout on preparing management plans that “you are not just giving out information; you’re trying to persuade your management to pick up your ideas. PERSUASION IS CRITICAL.” (emphasis original, Handout 13). While it is perhaps well known that business writing emphasizes persuasion, analysis of data collected for this study revealed two elements that seemed to be particularly important for business persuasion: consistency and plausibility. For a business plan to be persuasive, for example, the writer(s) had to demonstrate that the recommended course of action was consistent with the company’s goals, objectives, and mission. This consistency constituted an important criterion for evaluation. For example, one professor included “the consistency and accuracy of your mission/strategic plan with your actual decisions” (Handout 91) as one of the two major criteria for evaluating a strategic plan assignment. Further, in order to be persuasive, the writer(s) had to show that the recommended solutions or strategies could be implemented with resources available (i.e. there were financial, personnel, and technical resources necessary to implement the recommendations). This means that persuasiveness came in part from the plausibility of the recommendations. The need for feasibility was evident in faculty instructions on the assignments. For example, in a set of instructions provided on case analysis, one professor bolded a note which read “alternatives must be ‘do-able’ within the organization’s resources and constraints” (Syllabus 88).

Last but not least, the business genres required students to work with different data sources, different types of evidence/support, and to utilize different tools to solve problems and make decisions. The differences could be observed across business areas and/or genre types. For example, support for decisions in accounting tended to be based on theory and published documents such as accounting laws, standards, and regulations; students working on an accounting assignment were asked to “support two different plausible positions based on accounting theory and relevant official pronouncement” (Handout 49). In finance, however, decision-making tended to rely more on the quantitative results of applying specific financial analytical tools such as ratio analysis, cash flow analysis, growth analysis, etc, and financial statements such as statement of income, balance sheet, statement of cash flow were often included as evidence and support for the decisions and recommendations made. Similarly, different sources of information might count as data for different assignments in different business areas. For example, while interviews and relevant personal experience could count as viable sources of data for some computer design projects (e.g. for identifying user and system needs), they would rarely constitute proper data for financial reports.

Although assignments in management courses also emphasized decision-making, the handouts/syllabi analyzed, albeit small in number, and the faculty interview
suggested that an important focus in management courses was on “the perspective and responsibilities of decision-making” (Handout 25) and “clear thinking.” According to the management professor interviewed, “clear thinking” or “critical thinking” skills were particularly valued in management. Commenting on the nature of assignments in management courses, the professor said:

Students in the same class, same materials, different answers. That happens to management all the time. It’s one of the good things about management in my view. One of the bad things about management is if you are an accounting student, this drives accounting students nuts that there isn’t the right answer. (Interview 2, p. 4)

The professor explained that critical thinking was particularly important for management because it assisted in making choices, which in turn was fundamental to decision-making in management:

Management makes choices all the time from unclear questions and unclear answers and then tries to enlist support. Marketing and management are applications of decision-making. The choices—I am going to do something a certain way because I chose to, that’s where critical thinking comes in, and I make better choices than the alternatives. And nobody makes them all right, by the way (Interview 2, p.6)

Because of the importance of critical thinking skills for management, their integration into course assignments and tasks was “our absolute stated objective” according to the management professor. Given the emphasis on critical thinking in management, it is not surprising that students were asked to argue and support their decisions and positions in management reports by utilizing critical thinking skills. Students who did not share a similar emphasis, as could be expected, were thought to have missed the mark. The management professor commented:

They [the students] are just compulsive about whether it’s in the right form, in the right style. ‘How do you want your notes?’ ‘Do you want footnotes at the bottom of the page?’ … They [notes and format] may have a great deal to do with the quality of research, but for the things I in particular teach, the quality of research is almost inconsequential… Because I teach a class in [specific course title], there is not much to research on that, there is a whole lot to do clear thinking on. (Interview 2, page 2, emphasis added)

Thus, the data analyzed suggested that while there was a shared emphasis on problem-solving and decision-making across business areas and business genres, the tools with which to solve the problems and make decisions could differ. Also, while the scope of this paper does not permit discussion of diversity within a specific
business area, data collected for this study indicated that even within the same business area, students in different courses could be asked to perform different tasks by using different data sources, problem-solving tools, and types of evidence/support.

Analysis of data also revealed several types of skills that were called upon to perform the major business genres.

3.10. Cognitive skills

Business genres in general placed rather high cognitive demands on students and required several higher order cognitive skills identified in Carson (2001) and Hale et al.’s (1996) classifications of cognitive abilities, the latter of which is “loosely based on Bloom’s (1956) taxonomy of educational objectives” (Hale et al., 1996: 12). The business genres called upon the students to apply concepts, approaches, methods, theories, and models to problem-solving and decision-making processes (e.g. apply the multiple method approach to sales forecasting in a business plan). In addition, students needed to analyze information provided on or collected for an assignment to identify major factors contributing to a problem or identify the sub-issues surrounding a main issue and their relationships. Further, students were often asked to evaluate solutions, strategies, or procedures (e.g. in a case analysis where students were asked to evaluate alternatives or in a design project where students were expected to evaluate a system according to specified objectives of the system or a set of specific criteria). Last but not least, the tasks involved in business genres rendered necessary the ability to interpret, integrate and synthesize information of a different nature and from different sources. For example, business reports and proposals often required students to integrate and synthesize quantitative and/or qualitative information from primary and secondary sources. Likewise, design projects often required students to integrate information obtained from interviews and from review of relevant documents to derive an understanding of the needs of the system.

3.11. Rhetorical skills

The major business genres entailed a variety of rhetorical modes described in Hale et al.’s (1996) classification of discourse modes for the purpose of organizing and presenting information. Problem–solution was a rhetorical mode often used in the business genres, as students were expected to identify the problem, the need, or the goals of a company and propose solutions to the problem or strategies/plans to meet the need or achieve the goals. However, problem-solution was often used in combination with other modes in the “layered” or “mixed” fashion (cf. Brown’s layered and mixed syllabuses, 1995) in more extensive business assignments. For example, in the mixed fashion, problem–solution could be proceeded by the background and history of a company or a country (narrative), as in some business reports and proposals. In the layered fashion, other rhetorical modes could be used within the problem–solution mode to identify the problem, need, or goal, or outline the solutions and strategies: comparison (e.g. when a company’s performance was compared
over a period of time or with that of other companies), process (e.g. when strategies and specific steps to be taken were outlined), and enumeration (e.g. when identifying the duties of different company personnel, the goals of the plan, or when presenting the threats and opportunities of the business in a business plan). Certain rhetorical modes seemed to be especially useful for a particular type of assignment. For example, process and description were particularly useful for design projects. The process mode was used to provide information on (a) the sequence of system activities (e.g. how the system would work and what would happen once the system was activated); (b) the application procedure of a tool or technique (e.g. how the Black Box Description Language of Cleanroom was applied); and (c) the steps/measures to be taken to support an expected action. Description was frequently used in design projects to describe the proposed system, including (a) the components and parts of the system and their functions and connections), and (b) the products generated by the system (e.g. textual description of the reports to be generated by the system). These types of descriptions were often performed with technical terms and language.

Besides the ability to control a variety of rhetorical modes (e.g. problem solution, comparison, process, and description, etc.) and to use them purposefully and flexibly within the same assignment to present information, students need to have a strong sense of the business audience and an understanding of the strategies for achieving effective business communication, as discussed in the section concerning the real-world nature of business genres. For many assignments, students’ ability to communicate in a style that emphasizes effectiveness and efficiency through concise expression and deployment of visual devices is essential. In addition to audience awareness, students need to understand the contexts for writing and the influences the contexts have on the content and rhetorical choices they can make. For example, what elements are especially important for persuasion within a particular business assignment? What constitutes appropriate data and evidence, and what are the available and appropriate tools to solve problems and make decisions for a particular assignment and/or business area?

3.12. Other skills

Successful performance on the business genres also required a range of other skills such as the ability to summarize information, the ability to support decisions with evidence, the ability to present information with clarity, the ability to use disciplinary specific language, and the ability to use standard written English. As business reports and sometimes case analysis tended to call on students to use information from secondary sources, paraphrasing and citation skills became particularly relevant for these assignments. In addition, the team-oriented nature of business genres indicated that the ability to interact with team members and contribute to team effort was important. Because many professors utilized peer evaluation as an important form of student assessment on group projects, and because it was not unusual for teams to be formed based on students’ expertise in different business or skills areas, students’ ability to negotiate expertise and tasks with other
members of the team became important. Further, because successful performance on many business assignments depended on the information collected, students’ ability to gather information through interviews, surveys, data bases, and other sources and to interpret the information collected was important. Finally, success on task completion was contingent upon students’ understanding of the instructions provided on an assignment, which could be quite lengthy and complex. As the IT professor I interviewed said, in order for students to complete the assignments successfully, they first had to “understand what I am telling them in English.” (Interview 1, transcript page 2).

4. Discussion and conclusion

This study identified and defined writing assignments required in undergraduate and graduate business courses and examined the characteristics of several types of assignments and skills entailed by them. Results showed the diversity of assignments in terms of genre types. While some assignments represented genres more common in the university context, others represented genres more connected to the business discipline. While both categories of genres were tied to the curriculum, they seemed to cast students into different primary roles. The more common academic genres cast the writers essentially in their institutional role (i.e., writers as learners); the disciplinary genres, on the other hand, initiated students into their professional role (i.e., writers as business people) by allowing students to solve real-world problems and employ business communication devices.

Disciplinary genres, however, may still serve institutional functions by covering the curriculum and requiring students to demonstrate their knowledge of the curriculum as learners, as in the case of the business plan discussed. This is not surprising given the institutional context in which student writing takes place. This nevertheless suggests that in some business assignments, students need to perform at least dual roles: as business people, the professional role, and as learners, the institutional role. Consequently, it suggests that the school forum, where the student assumes the learner role, and the professional forum, where the student assumes the professional role (as observed by Herrington, 1985, in different courses) may co-exist in the same course and even the same assignment. The school and professional forums do not have to be separated in terms of physical space, but instead may be juxtaposed and co-existent. This means that instead of operating in two separate forums where roles may be more clearly defined or perceived, business students on many occasions may have to function and communicate in two forums simultaneously in courses and/or assignments which require writers to take on both learner and professional roles. This possibility raises interesting questions. Is there any tension between these expected roles? How do students negotiate, juggle and perform these roles? Whether and how do professors judge students’ performance in their respective roles?

Results of this study indicate that although business genres share a problem-solving and decision-making orientation, the tools with which to solve problems and make decisions differ in different business areas and assignments. The diversity in
and preferences for different problem-solving and decision-making tools and information sources suggest that “business” may not constitute a single and unified discourse community. While more research is needed to better understand the values and discursive practices in different business courses, it is not unreasonable to speculate that for some business students (e.g. MBA students who need to take courses from a number of business areas), understanding what is valued, and where, is crucial. In other words, students need to understand what would constitute appropriate information sources, evidence, and problem-solving tools in particular courses and assignments.

Results of the study suggest some potential discrepancies between the skills required for assignments in business courses and those taught in EAP writing courses. For example, students in business courses need to write for a broader range of audiences (both academic and professional) than students in EAP courses, where the intended audience is often academic in nature (e.g. the instructor, peers, and other members of the academic community). This difference in the range of audiences entails a difference in the range of styles used: business students need not only the academic style (for academic genres) but also the professional style that emphasizes communication with impression. Another potential discrepancy is that while many EAP writing assignments often emphasize short essays which tend to require students to utilize a single rhetorical mode for an assignment (e.g. description, comparison, etc), many assignments in business courses require students to combine several rhetorical modes purposefully and to move from one to another smoothly within the same assignment. Still another difference is that, similar to students in other university content courses (Leki & Carson, 1997), business students are held responsible for the content of their writing. For example, the solutions/strategies they recommend must not only be sensible but also feasible. In EAP writing courses, however, students generally are not responsible for the content of their writing (Leki & Carson, 1997). In addition to the above differences, business assignments may require students to collect and integrate quantitative and qualitative information from a greater variety of sources (e.g. both primary and secondary) than assignments in EAP courses in which students tend to work with information from published sources such as journals, books, and magazines. Last but not least, EAP and business courses require different types of group work. Like Canseco and Byrd’s (1989) study, this study found that business assignments emphasize group work. Yet, what is valued in business courses is the ability to work cooperatively (see Davidson & Worsham, 1992, for key characteristics of cooperative learning groups) versus the ability to work in peer response groups often seen in EAP writing courses.

Limitations of the study need to be considered when interpreting its findings. First, this study examined writing assignments required in the College of Business Administration at one university only. Different business schools might offer different courses and require different kinds of assignments, and future studies may analyze writing assignments from different types of institutions and programs. Second, the assignments analyzed did not represent all courses offered, and the number of assignments analyzed varied across program areas and instructional levels. Future studies could examine writing assignments from different courses and instructional levels within the same business area to provide insight into the similarities and/or
differences in writing assignments within a particular business area. Third, the data collected were examined by one researcher only, and although efforts were made to tap into the “emic” perspective of business professors, researcher bias might have affected analysis and interpretation of the data. Future research could involve multiple researchers. Inter-disciplinary studies involving both writing researchers and business faculty members may yield particularly insightful results.

In spite of the limitations noted above, this study provides useful information concerning the types of writing assignments second language learners are likely to encounter in business courses. It also provides some information on the skills students need to successfully complete the required assignments. While sound pedagogical recommendations need to be made based on a better understanding of the nature of business writing—understanding acquired through continued research—the findings of this study have some implications for writing curriculum design and instruction in EAP programs. Ideally, the needs of ESL students who intend to major in business are met through courses or sessions specially designed for business majors because these classes can better address students’ interests and provide a meaningful context for writing development. However, in many EAP programs, special courses or sessions for business majors may not be possible due to limited resources. Whether or not separate courses or sessions are offered, the findings of this study suggest that there are skills that EAP instructors can help students develop in order to address their business writing tasks.

First, EAP writing courses and instructors could help students develop analytical and problem-solving skills. Many writing assignments in business courses are problem-oriented and require students to analyze information, identify problems, propose recommendations for action, and justify the recommendations. Assignments often found in EAP writing courses, on the other hand, are topic-oriented and require students to present information on the topics based on personal experience and/or research (e.g. the library research paper). Through introducing and utilizing problem-oriented writing tasks, EAP writing courses and instructors could provide opportunities for students to practice problem-oriented writing and to foster the development of analytical and problem-solving skills. Problem-oriented writing tasks are also likely to encourage students to gather and use information of a different nature from different sources to solve the problems posed.

Second, EAP writing courses and instructors could help students develop an awareness of professional audiences and an ability to address their needs. Although the emphasis on the academic audience in EAP courses is well justified by the goal of helping students develop academic writing skills so that they can cope with academic requirements in content courses, the results of this study indicate that the academic audience may not always be the intended audience of writing assignments required in content courses. Therefore, it is important to teach second language learners how to write for different audiences, academic and non-academic, and help them develop the ability to organize and present information based on an assessment of audience needs. Students could also be assisted by requiring them to explore different writing styles and to develop document design and “graphic literacy” skills (i.e. how to present information efficiently and effectively through various visual devices). In
addition, instruction can aim at helping students develop sensitivity to the contexts of writing and an understanding of how contexts influence the roles writers take in an assignment and the choices and constraints writers face in terms of data, evidence, and essential elements for persuasion.

Third, EAP writing courses and instructors could help second language learners further develop teamwork skills. Peer group work in many EAP classes (i.e. peer response) does not require students to be jointly responsible for a shared product. In business courses, however, students work toward a common goal and share responsibility for a common product. Success in these cooperative groups depends on interaction and interdependence between group members and requires a different set of skills from peer response. In cooperative groups, members must know how to negotiate a common task as well as their individual responsibility, how to provide input and feedback on others’ work, and how to reach consensus when conflicts arise. Providing second language students opportunities and training for working in cooperative teams could help them develop the type of teamwork skills crucial for successful performance on many business assignments.

In order to help second language writers perform writing tasks in different academic disciplines, it is important for EAP curriculum designers and instructors to understand the nature of the writing tasks required and students’ writing needs. The study reported here represents an effort to understand the types and nature of writing assignments found in business courses. Future studies which continue to examine business writing or focus on writing in other disciplines can provide further insight into writing in academic contexts and will have important implications for theory building, classroom instruction, and writing assessment.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to the business faculty members who provided various kinds of information on writing in business courses. This study would not have been possible without their help. This work was supported, in part, by a research grant awarded by the Faculty Research Council at the University of South Florida. I would like to thank ESP co-editor Diane Belcher, three anonymous reviewers, and William Grabe for their insightful comments on an earlier version of this paper. I would also like to thank my research assistant, Lisana Mohammed, for her assistance with data collection and interview transcribing.

References


Wei Zhu is an Assistant Professor in the Linguistics Program at the University of South Florida. She has taught in China and the United States and has published in *Written Communication* and *Language Learning*. Her research interests include peer response, writing strategies, and academic literacy.