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Reading-to-write tasks for professional purposes in Spanish as a foreign language : an empirical study among 19 master's students

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**Short title for running head: Reading-to-write tasks in Spanish as a foreign language**

**Full title: Reading-to-write tasks for professional purposes in Spanish as a foreign language: An empirical study among 19 master's students**

This article is a contribution to the research area of Language Acquisition and Language Learning of the journal.

### **Abstract**

A reading-to-write task is a complex cognitive activity. The aim of this study is to gain insight into the difficulties that advanced learners of Spanish as a foreign language for professional communication purposes experience when they have to perform a reading-to-write task. This insight will help to improve writing instruction and training for this particular type of students. In this study, 19 students of a one-year master's programme in multilingual professional communication (level B2-C1 of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, Council of Europe, 2001) were asked to carry out a reading-to-write task in Dutch, their mother tongue, and in Spanish at the beginning of the academic year. This task was repeated at the end of the academic year. On both occasions, the task was writing an informative synthesis of approximately 200-250 words using three digital source texts in Dutch and in Spanish pertaining to different text genres (i.e., a report from the European Union, a website, a newspaper article). The three source texts varied in lexical and syntactical complexity, content, style and discursive characteristics. All written products were evaluated by two independent raters. We found no general improvement in the reading-

to-write task between the two moments, neither in the L1 nor in the L2. We did not find an improvement at sentence, text, or discourse level either. We will explore several explanations for this lack of improvement, based on theoretical models of foreign language acquisition and recent empirical writing research.

### **Keywords**

Reading-to-write tasks; Spanish as a foreign language for professional communication purposes; writing skill acquisition in a foreign language; writing skill acquisition in the mother tongue; experimental research

### **Resumen**

Las tareas que consisten en leer para escribir, o *reading-to-write tasks*, son operaciones cognitivas complejas. Este estudio se concibió con el fin de adquirir una mejor comprensión de las dificultades a las que se enfrentan los aprendices avanzados del español como lengua extranjera para fines comunicativos profesionales (N=19, nivel del Marco Común Europeo de Referencia: B2-C1) a la hora de realizar una tarea de este tipo. El objetivo es analizar el producto de redacción tanto en la lengua materna como en la lengua extranjera y aprovechar los resultados para poder mejorar la práctica de la competencia de redacción profesional en este tipo de alumnado. Concretamente, se les pidió a 19 estudiantes de una carrera académica de comunicación profesional multilingüe (un programa de máster de un año) que realizaran al principio del curso una tarea de leer para escribir tanto en su lengua materna (el neerlandés) como en español (una lengua extranjera para ellos). Esta tarea se repitió al final del curso. En las dos ocasiones se trató de un ejercicio de redacción de síntesis informativa de unas 200-250 palabras a partir de tres

diferentes fuentes digitales en neerlandés y en español (un informe de la Unión Europea, un sitio web, un artículo de prensa). Estas fuentes fueron manipuladas en cuanto a complejidad léxica y sintáctica, contenido, estilo, género y propiedades discursivas. Todas las redacciones, de los dos momentos y para las dos lenguas, fueron valoradas por dos evaluadores independientes. En contraste con las hipótesis iniciales, no se pudo observar ninguna mejoría estadísticamente significativa entre los dos momentos en las redacciones realizadas ni en la lengua materna ni en la lengua extranjera. Tampoco se pudo constatar una mejoría a nivel sintáctico, textual o discursivo. En esta contribución se pretende dar varias posibles explicaciones de esta ausencia de mejora esperada. Para ello, se recurre a modelos de teorías de adquisición de una lengua extranjera y a los resultados de investigaciones empíricas recientes sobre la competencia escrita.

### **Palabras clave**

Tareas de leer para escribir; español como lengua extranjera para fines de comunicación profesional; adquisición de la competencia escrita en una lengua extranjera; adquisición de la competencia escrita en la lengua materna; investigación experimental

### **1. *Background and aim***

A reading-to-write task for professional purposes is always a challenging undertaking. As Schriver (2012) states in her extensive review on expertise in professional communication, writing for professional purposes is primarily of a functional nature. As such, it plays an important role in a much broader social practice, namely the creation of cognitive structures and relational networks among people through shared

content. As a consequence, a reading-to-write task requires a wide variety of cognitive abilities, namely the ability to separate main ideas from secondary issues and causes from consequences, but also the ability to synthesize and memorize to coherently integrate the different content elements. Successful execution of such a task also requires appropriate writing skills, which do not only entail the ability to use grammar and spelling and to respect the discursive features of the chosen genre, but also the pragmatic ability to apply the right rhetorical devices to achieve the communicative goals of the text (Alamargot, Terrier, & Cellier, 2007; Asención Delaney, 2008).

A reading-to-write task is an even greater challenge when writers have to carry out this complex activity in a language other than their own (Weigle, 2002, 2004). Although the empirical evidence of variables important in a reading-to-write task in a foreign language is growing, it is still inconclusive (for an overview, see Ruiz-Funes, 2014, 2015). Furthermore, Nas and Van Esch (2014, p. 492) state in their chapter on writing in the *Handbook of Spanish Second Language Acquisition* that, contrary to the many studies on English L2 writing in general, the research on Spanish second/foreign language writing is a fairly new avenue of research. Nas and Van Esch (2014) particularly underline the need for new empirical research that describes and explains in detail the units of analysis. In order to contribute to this research agenda for reading-to-write tasks in general, and for such tasks in Spanish as a foreign language in particular, we performed a reading-to-write experiment with 19 students from the master's programme in Professional Communication at the University of Antwerp.

The reason for choosing a reading-to-write task instead of a writing-only experiment is that professional communicators always write for stakeholders on an as-needed basis, or, as Schriver (2012) puts it: "Whether one writes and designs for a living or as part of one's role in another career, one's professional communication activity involves the intentional design of visual and verbal artifacts for stakeholders, who

bring their own purposes for engaging with the content” (p. 280). In other words, professional writing always consists of an essential preparatory stage of research, reflection, and interpretation of the content to be treated. But there are also pedagogical reasons to use a reading-to-write assignment. As Hyland (2011) advises: “Writing is often structured according to the demands and expectations of target discourse communities. Therefore, teachers need to provide tasks which encourage students to consider the reader’s perspective by incorporating a range of real and simulated audience sources.” (p. 32). We consider this pedagogy, which attempts to simulate authentic real-life assignments as much as possible, the most appropriate to prepare students for their future careers.

During the one-year master’s programme in Professional Communication, the participants of this study received ample instruction and training to acquire these specific skills, both in their mother tongue (Dutch) and in a foreign language (Spanish, level B2 at the beginning of the course but reaching level C1 at the end; Council of Europe, 2001). They were taught how to use their high-level command of general writing skills (acquired during their bachelor’s degree in [applied] linguistics) in several writing assignments of a professional or academic nature (business letters and reports, papers, and a master’s thesis), using, on the one hand, a thorough screening of the content, and on the other, autonomous thinking and creativity.

To track their progress, we asked the students at the beginning and at the end of the academic year to complete a reading-to-write task in both Dutch (L1) and Spanish (foreign language). We expected to see improvement in both languages, although less in the foreign language than in the L1, since reading-to-write skills are trained explicitly in several Dutch courses of the master’s programme but in only one Spanish

course. In the following section, we will briefly motivate our hypothesis in light of recent empirical data, which will also allow us to identify important variables that may have to be taken into consideration for the interpretation of the results.

## **2. *Previous empirical data on writing in a foreign language***

In a study by Victori Blaya (1997), the writing processes in a foreign language of two good writers was compared to that of two weaker ones. The author observed that the good writers used important supportive writing strategies, such as content planning, organizing, evaluation, and revision, which resulted in a linguistically more accurate product. The good writers were clearly able to pay more attention to linguistic accuracy thanks to the effective use of pre- and post-writing strategies. This observation has been corroborated in several other studies, such as that by De Silva (2015), who found in a longitudinal intervention study among undergraduate students of English for specific purposes that their use of writing strategies and their level of writing performance significantly improved after strategy instruction. In other words, being a good writer is certainly about inspiration but mostly about transpiration, and it is possible to learn to write by putting various skills rather than merely writing skills to work (as is the case in all cognitively complex operations). Plakans (2008, 2009) for instance observes in her research the importance of the preparatory reading process of source texts. In a more general manner, Mehta and Al-Mahrooqi (2015) show in their study how creative and critical thinking can be stimulated through oral discussions and written assignments.

In addition to writing strategies, reading, and critical thinking, several studies confirm that language proficiency can have a positive effect on writing in a foreign language (for an overview, see Ortega, 2012; specifically, with respect to lexical proficiency, see Baba, 2009). In a study by Roca de Larios, Manchón, Murphy, and Marín (2008) on 21 Spanish students of English, the authors come to the conclusion that an

advanced proficiency level in the foreign language allows learners to strategically decide what aspects of the writing activity need more attention, something that is beneficial to the final product.

Another important variable is the level of writing competence in the L1. There is empirical evidence that writing strategies are transferred from the L1 into the foreign language (Schoonen et al., 2003). Kobayashi and Rinnert (2008) concluded from an experiment among 28 Japanese university students that integrating L1 writing skills in foreign language writing instruction has a positive effect on the written product, as opposed to using an instructional approach that only focuses on the foreign language. Sadiq and Negmeldin (2012), however, found in their research that this transfer can be potentially impacted by the learner's proficiency level in the foreign language. This means that a lower proficiency level will absorb a learner's capacity to pay attention to linguistic accuracy and will leave no room for the potentially positive influence of learned writing skills in the L1.

Based on the outcomes of these studies, we expect an improvement in text quality in both the L1 and the second language (L2), since all of our participants comply with the necessary skills mentioned above: they have an advanced proficiency level in Spanish, thanks to a previous bachelor's degree in (applied) linguistics with Spanish as a foreign language, and they have been instructed and trained in professional writing in both their L1 and the foreign language during the master's programme. The results of the studies by Ruiz-Funes (2014, 2015) even allow us to formulate hypotheses as to what aspects of the writing will improve. Ruiz-Funes examines the relationship between task complexity, language proficiency, and writing skills, as well as the output quality, among university students of Spanish as a foreign language who have different proficiency levels. Her results suggest a positive influence of task complexity on syntactic complexity, linguistic accuracy, and fluency

in the writing process. However, Ruiz-Funes found that these three aspects improved simultaneously but only when participants possessed good writing skills in combination with an advanced proficiency level. We therefore expect to see improvement, either in syntax and accuracy, or in the product as a whole, without studying the process data.

To summarize, this study examines the potential improvement between the writing samples in the foreign language at the beginning and at the end of the course. It aims to pinpoint the influential variables that deserve more attention in teaching and training. The study also examines the differences and similarities in output quality between the foreign language and the mother tongue. This means that the present study is limited to the written product. The writing process will not be taken into account, although process data (writing and online consultations) were registered using the keystroke logging software *Inputlog* (Leijten & Van Waes, 2013) and will be object of a future study.

### 3. **Methodology**

In this section we will discuss the profile of the participants, as well as the content of the master's programme with respect to writing training in the L1 and the foreign language. We will also describe the experimental design of the two test moments in detail (i.e., the tasks and rating procedure).

#### 3.1 *Participants*

The 19 students in this study were all native Dutch-speaking master's students of professional communication, between ages 21 and 23, holding a bachelor's degree in Spanish (applied) linguistics. At the beginning of the course *Spanish for professional communication*, their

proficiency was at a B2 level for oral and written communication, and C1 for oral and written comprehension, according to the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* of the Council of Europe (2001). Although no explicit testing on the overall level of proficiency of the participants was carried out at the beginning of the course, several writing exercises were given during the first term. The results of these exercises were similar to those of the previous years. In other words, this particular group of participants did not stand out in terms of their proficiency level, neither in a positive nor in a negative way.

The course pursues a C1 level for both written and oral productive competences in professional communication in Spanish. It consists of a total number of 48 teaching hours, distributed over 24 weeks, and a total study load of 102 hours. Course time is distributed equally over oral and written assignments, with a total of 8 written assignments for simulated professional purposes: a CV, a presentation letter, an expository summary, an argumentative essay, a product presentation, a letter announcing a product launch, minutes of a meeting, and a communication plan. The latter is the most important assignment, since it is conceived as a portfolio which contains several written assignments, such as a stakeholder analysis containing a sociocultural and linguistic report of the context and the various agents, as well as the different parts of the communication plan itself (e.g., planning and message samples). In all these course components, the ability to summarize multiple sources is crucial, as well as the ability to write creatively with a certain target audience in mind. In this sense, the course is good preparation for the task of this experiment.

As stated above, this course is the only Spanish course the students take in the master's programme. It adds up to 6 out of a total of 60 credits. The ratio is one to five for the Spanish course with respect to its weight in the professional writing instruction and training components

of the master's programme. The remaining credits are taught in Dutch (with the possible exception of one optional course in English, French, or German). Several of these Dutch courses explicitly discuss one or several genres of professional written communication: Communication for organizations (6 credits), Business communication (6 credits), Financial reporting (6 credits), Marketing communication (3 credits), Digital communication (3 credits), Intercultural communication (3 credits), and Meeting and negotiating (3 credits).

### 3.2 Reading-to-write tasks

The students were given two similar tasks (one in Dutch and one in Spanish) at the beginning and at the end of the master's programme (example in Appendix 1). As is shown in Table 1, the Spanish course had started 4 weeks before the participants took the pretest, and they were still taking the Spanish course when they took the posttest in week 9 of the second term (about half a year later). This course tackles both written and oral professional communication in an integrated manner. This means that the students have to carry out writing tasks during the whole course, although not all tasks require previous reading of source material, such as minutes of a simulated meeting and several types of business letters.

Table 1. Duration of the Spanish course and timing of the tests.

1 <sup>st</sup> term Spanish course during 12 weeks	pretest in week 5 of the 1 <sup>st</sup> term
2 <sup>nd</sup> term Spanish course during 12 weeks	posttest in week 9 of the 2 <sup>nd</sup> term

The participants were asked to write a synthesis of 200-250 words on a given topic based on the reading of three given digital sources in Dutch and in Spanish. They repeated this task for both languages at the end of the course year, which means that they wrote two texts in Dutch and two in Spanish in total. Both topic and language order were counterbalanced. The students had 40 minutes to complete the synthesis. They were allowed to access the internet and consult any type of online source.

The students were informed that the target audience of their synthesis were final-year high school students and that the text was to have an appealing effect on this particular group of readers. The participants could relate to this target group, since they had been high school students themselves only a few years before. This type of reading-to-write task is defined in the literature as a meaning-making, genre-based task since it requires consideration of context, audience, purpose, and culturally and socially determined rhetorical and discourse patterns (Ellis, 2009). Therefore, its cognitive complexity is high as it calls for more than merely linguistic skills in the foreign language and builds on reasoning and problem-solving thinking (Byrnes & Manchón, 2014).

### 3.3 *Materials*

As stated above, the participants wrote one text in Dutch and one in Spanish at the beginning of the course year. The source materials they used to write these texts were also in these two languages. For each language and each test moment, a different set of digital source materials was given, depending on the topic. There were four different topics in total: humanitarian aid, renewable energy, animal rights, and climate

change. For each of these topics we provided three source texts pertaining to three different text genres: a report, a web article, and a newspaper article. To make sure that all topics and all text genres were of similar complexity, we manipulated the text length, the average number of words per sentence, as well as the word frequencies of all source texts.

The report was based on an original report of the European Union and contained the most important information on the topic. It contained, on average, 20 words per sentence and was written in a formal style. The web article followed the structure and formulation of a *good practice* online article, using clear and simple language. It contained shorter sentences (of approximately 9 words), enumerations, and a picture. The newspaper article complied with the standard genre conventions: the most important information was given first, and less relevant information was included at the end of the text. With an average of 15 words per sentence, the complexity of the newspaper article was in between that of the report and the web text. The content and language used in the three sources was deliberately kept different to increase the task complexity. The same rationale was used for the choice of different target audiences for the three sources and the synthesis to be produced.

#### 3.4 *Procedure*

The experimental sessions started with a copy task to familiarize the students with the computer classroom setting. Subsequently, they were asked to perform the first writing task. Students had a maximum of 40 minutes to finish the task. We asked the students to do a filler task, in which they were asked to describe the strengths and weaknesses of the master's programme, should they finish the synthesis task before the

40 minutes were over. This way, all students continued to use the keyboard and watch their own screen. The filler task aimed to prevent the students from being distracted and influenced by their peers, as they were all together in the same computer room. After a short break, the students carried out the second writing task, following the same procedure. Finally, all students filled in a consent form.

### 3.5 *Rating*

The written products of the students were rated using two assessment methods: a holistic assessment and an analytic assessment. The procedure for the *holistic assessment* of the output is based on a benchmark rating procedure, which means that the criteria used in this assessment are the result of a comparative, empirically-based approach. We gave preference to this procedure because research has shown that raters evaluate text quality more reliably when they can compare two texts, rather than having to assign a score to a single text (Bouwer & Koster, 2016; Pollitt, 2012).

We will first describe how the benchmark texts were selected and subsequently discuss the rating procedure. This benchmark rating procedure is based on several previous studies to evaluate students' writing procedure (Bouwer & Koster, 2016; De Smedt, Van Keer, & Merchie, 2016). The quality of the output in Dutch was discussed with a team of eight academic experts in professional writing. For this discussion, all Dutch writing samples produced during the two test moments were presented in a random order to the expert team. They examined the output thoroughly in two rounds to establish the assessment criteria. In the first round, they were asked to individually divide the writing products into five batches (i.e., one batch of average texts, a batch of 1 standard deviation [SD] above the average, a batch of 2 SD above the average, and two batches of 1SD and 2SD below average), based on their general appreciation. From each batch, they had to choose

one text as the most representative for its category. In the second round, during a group interview, the five benchmark texts were discussed, allowing the experts to come to a consensus about the different assessment criteria as well as the five categories. The discussion resulted in a benchmark instrument, which included the five benchmark texts with the corresponding qualitative descriptions. The criteria used in these descriptions were content (integration of the information from the source texts), structure (coherence and logic), style (discursive and pragmatic adequacy), language (lexicon and syntax), and visual structure (headline, billboard, topic sentence, paragraphs). The benchmark instrument used for the purpose of this study can be found in Appendix 2.

This benchmark instrument was subsequently used to rate the writing products in Dutch and Spanish of the 19 participants. Four experienced raters (two for Dutch and two different ones for Spanish; all four being members of the expert panel) scored the texts from the two test moments on the agreed scale with a mean of 100, taking the five benchmark texts as calibration standards. The texts were scored blindly and both raters received a fully randomized batch. The overall interrater reliability of the rating of the Dutch texts was .72 (fairly good - good). When we refined this reliability to each test moment, it was .676 for the pretest and .747 for the posttest. The interrater reliability for the Spanish texts was .94 (very good): .953 for the texts written in the beginning of the year and .931 for the texts written at the end of the year.

In addition to the holistic assessment, the Spanish writing samples were also assessed *analytically*, since the main scope of this study is on the writing in Spanish as a foreign language. We wanted to examine whether a potential lack of improvement was caused by a particular component that may have remained hidden in the overall holistic evaluation. Recent research has shown that raters may unintentionally weigh

in their holistic assessment of a writing product certain aspects of writing over others, which may obscure the progress made with respect to other aspects (Bouwer & Koster, 2016; Olinghouse, Santangelo, & Wilson, 2012).

For the analytic assessment, we also used the benchmark procedure but distinguished between three different levels: the sentence level, the textual level, and the discursive level. The criteria corresponding to each level can be consulted in the assessment rubric in Appendix 3. The reason for adopting these three levels of assessment is twofold. First, the empirical literature on writing acquisition in a foreign language tends to focus on criteria of syntactic complexity, linguistic accuracy, and fluency, the so-called *CAF parameters*. Fluency during the writing process is beyond the scope of this study, but we included the two other parameters at the sentence level (linguistic accuracy) and the textual level (syntactic complexity). This will allow us to discuss our results in light of other studies. Second, the addition of the discursive level is based on the study of Chan, Inoue, and Taylor (2015), who examined the development of rubrics to specifically assess reading-into-writing skills, and explicitly included the evaluation of the contribution of reading ability to the writing sample in the assessment. The discursive level assesses the reading-to-write ability in the sense that it not only evaluates to what extent the information of the source texts is included in the product, but also assesses if the information is adequately adapted to the task goals in terms of style and rhetoric (pragmatic adequacy).

The analytic assessment of the writing samples took place approximately two months after the first, holistic rating of the texts. To avoid potential bias on the basis of the previous rating, the raters were given a new blind copy of all texts, again randomly presented. The interrater reliability was .69 for the sentence level, .63 for the text level, and .72 for the discourse level.

#### **4. Results**

In this section, we will discuss the results of both the holistic and analytic assessments.

#### 4.1 *Holistic assessment*

As can be seen in Table 2, there is no statistically significant improvement in the holistic quality of the Dutch texts from the pretest (Mdn = 92.50) to the posttest (Mdn = 90.00,  $T = 68.50$ ,  $p = .459$ ). The same applies to the Spanish texts, showing no significant difference between text quality at the beginning (Mdn = 92.50) and end of the course year (Mdn = 87.50,  $T = 93.00$ ,  $p = .434$ ). We will address possible explanations for this unexpected lack of improvement in both the L1 and the foreign language in Section 5.

Table 2. Holistic results for the Dutch and Spanish texts.

	Pretest (n=19)	Posttest (n=19)	
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Significance
Holistic result Dutch	92.76 (22.16)	98.82 (24.23)	.459
Holistic result Spanish	90.92 (28.73)	87.64 (34.96)	.434

#### 4.2 *Analytic assessment*

In addition to the holistic assessment, we asked the raters to assess each writing product in Spanish analytically, using a scale with a mean of 100, at the sentence, text, and discourse level (see Appendix 3).

First, we tested if the analytic ratings measured separate components in comparison to the holistic assessment. We conducted a Kendall's Tau correlation analysis for non-parametric data and found that the holistic ratings did not relate to the analytic scoring component of the texts written at the beginning ( $\tau = .07$  (sentence),  $.09$  (text), and  $-.03$  (discourse)), nor at the end ( $\tau = .25$  (sentence),  $.23$  (text), and  $.31$  (discourse)). It is therefore useful to report the analytic rating as an additional perspective on the writing products. A non-parametric Wilcoxon signed-rank test was used to examine whether the analytic quality of the texts written in Dutch and Spanish at the beginning of the course year differed significantly from the quality of those written at the end. Table 3 presents the results of the analytic assessment.

Table 3. Analytic results for the Spanish texts.

	Pretest (n=19)	Posttest (n=19)	
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Significance
Sentence level	96 (21)	102 (26)	.981
Text level	98 (21)	99 (23)	.341
Discourse level	92 (23)	101 (30)	.794

Although there is a slight improvement at each of the three levels, none of these is statistically significant. Our initial hypothesis was that a cognitively high demanding and complex task combined with an advanced level of proficiency in Spanish and in professional writing would lead

to improvement of a certain kind. However, given the results of the holistic and analytic assessments, this hypothesis cannot be confirmed. In the following section, we will discuss a number of possible explanations for these results.

## **5. Discussion**

The finding that the text quality does not improve over the course of one academic year, not even in the students' mother tongue, is slightly puzzling. As mentioned in the introduction, we had not expected the students to perform equally well in both Spanish and Dutch. However, we had expected some improvement in their mother tongue, as this would be in line with previous research. Martínez et al. (2015) showed that the experimental group performed significantly better after taking a course in writing syntheses in their L1, which is also one of the key components of the master's programme of the participants in this study. Moreover, more contact hours are devoted to instruction in writing texts in Dutch than in Spanish, which could have been a positive influencing factor (Lenski & Johns, 1997; Mateos et al., 2014). Also, the feedback given in the Dutch writing courses is of a metalinguistic nature, rather than merely corrective, forcing the students to reflect critically upon the pragmatic adequacy of their samples which, according to recent empirical research on feedback, increases its effectiveness due to the active role of the learner in the process (Lázaro Ibarrola, 2009, p. 195). In summary, the question as to why there was no progress in the L1 texts between the two test moments, not only fails to confirm the outcomes of previous recent studies, but also remains unanswered.

Of course, there is an important factor that has not been examined in this study: the writing process. We think that a possible explanation might be found in how the participants go about their writing process, for example, if, when, and how they revise. Mateos and Solé (2009) observed that more skilled and instructed writers revise their text with respect to content structuring and coherence. If this is true, a

more thorough revision could correlate positively with the quality of the text. Findings reported by Leijten, Van Waes, Schrijver, Bernolet, and Vangehuchten (2017) seem to point in this direction, as the 60 master's students who participated in that study carried out the same reading-to-write task experiment in the L1 as the task reported in the current article. They showed no improvement in the quality of their texts, although they appeared to have become more efficient in their processes, reaching more fluent writing process by the second test moment.

As for the lack of improvement in the Spanish texts in terms of the three analytic assessment criteria, i.e., linguistic accuracy (sentence level), syntactic complexity (text level), and adequacy (discourse level), this result also differs from outcomes of other empirical studies. As commented in Section 2, complex tasks in foreign language instruction in combination with good writing skills and an advanced linguistic proficiency lead to good reading-to-write products. Since our participants were explicitly instructed and trained in written professional communication between the pretest and the posttest in both in their L1 and in Spanish, we were confident to see our initial hypothesis confirmed, or at least partially confirmed, with respect to certain aspects. Perhaps we should have tested these aspects separately and through different tasks. As stated in Van Weijen et al. (2009), using a single text per person per language is not enough to measure a skill adequately. Therefore, a possible explanation might simply be that the lack of improvement is a task effect, in the sense that the tasks should be multiplied and diversified.

Another tentative explanation for the absence of progress at the sentence level and the text level in the Spanish texts can be found in the theoretical models on foreign language acquisition by Skehan (the Trade Off or Limited Capacity Hypothesis model) and by Robinson (the Cognition Hypothesis). According to Robinson (2015), a cognitively complex task obstructs simultaneous progress on all three basic indicators

of language proficiency (the already mentioned CAF factors, i.e., syntactic complexity, linguistic accuracy, and fluency in the process), even for students with an advanced proficiency, such as the ones participating in our experiment. This implies that one of these factors will be prioritized by learners over the other two. Although there are differences between the two models, the basic assumption of Skehan's hypothesis (2015) coincides with Robinson's: cognitively demanding tasks require learners to divide their attention between the CAF factors, which might even result in a negative outcome for all three of them. Recent empirical studies confirm these models. Mungra (2010), for instance, comments on the difficulties that Italian students experience when performing reading-to-write tasks for medical purposes in English. They remain stuck in the preparatory phase of the task, namely information extraction and assembling. Kuiken and Vedder (2008) found in their study of 150 Dutch students of Italian that time pressure led their participants to give priority to accuracy over syntactic complexity and lexical variation. This is, of course, subsidiary to both the linguistic proficiency and writing ability level, as demonstrated by, for instance, Manchón and Roca de Larios (2007), Leki, Cumming, and Silva (2008), and Ortega (2012), who argue that both high-level linguistic and writing skills are vital to a good CAF-performance in a complex task.

Consequently, it is possible that the lack of improvement is due to the one factor of the cited language acquisition models that has not been examined in our study, the fluency of the text production. The students had 40 minutes to complete the task in their L1 and in the foreign language, and therefore, following the hypotheses of Skehan and Robinson explained above, they might have given priority to the fluency factor over linguistic accuracy (sentence level) and syntactic complexity (text level). Time pressure may be a decisive influential variable in this way of operating. As argued by Roca de Larios, Manchón Ruiz, and Murphy (2007, p. 167), writers tend to show two different styles of writing:

the 'go-getters', who start writing and reflect upon their text afterwards, and the 'thinkers', who prefer to thoroughly think through what they plan to write. With only 40 minutes at their disposal, the 'go-getters' might not have had enough time to proceed to the necessary revision, and the 'thinkers' might have adapted their usual writing style under time pressure and just started writing by skipping the thinking part. In fact, one participant even mentioned in Dutch on his Spanish text sheet that "normally I could do a lot better than this, but not within 40 minutes, as this does not give me the time to think things through before starting to write". Since time pressure is also very prominent in professional writing settings (Leijten, Van Waes, Schriver, & Hayes, 2014), we will further examine the factor of time pressure in our next study.

This still leaves us with the question why no significant progress could be observed in the Spanish output at the discourse level in terms of pragmatic adequacy. Since the foreign language acquisition models focus on the CAF factors and their interdependence with the level of language proficiency and general writing skills, and, as such, leave out the discourse level of proficiency, an explanation is hard to find in these models. This might be due to the fact that reading-to-write research in a foreign language for advanced learners is still in its initial stages, as confirmed by Ruiz-Funes (2015): "This lack of consistency in the findings may be explained by the emerging nature of the research in this field within the domain of writing and, more importantly, by the variability in the types of tasks used, the manipulation of task complexity, the academic levels of the learners, as well as the language proficiency levels and performance levels controlled across studies" (p. 16). The lack of consistency in the findings across studies calls for a more defined research agenda, according to Ruiz-Funes (2015).

## **6. Conclusion**

We believe this study to contribute to the body of empirical evidence on reading-to-write research for professional purposes, as it compares the results for a similar task in both the L1 and the foreign language that was carried out by the same participants. At least two conclusions can be drawn from the present study, although they rather call for further research than serve as real conclusions.

First, it is essential to examine process data to find out which process factors possibly inhibit the improvement in text quality in both the L1 and the L2. Second, with respect to foreign language acquisition theory, the possibility that cognitively complex tasks carried out by writers with an advanced linguistic proficiency level and good writing skills do not automatically lead to a high-level writing performance needs to be given serious thought. The models of Robinson and Skehan concern general foreign language acquisition and are limited to the CAF factors. In our study, an important additional factor is pragmatic adequacy, which not only adds a considerable cognitive complexity to the task, but is also absent from cited models. The empirically-based literature contains indicators that motivate this hypothesis. For instance, in the studies by Kuiken and Vedder (2008, 2011, 2012) and Kormos (2011), no interaction effect between task complexity and syntactic complexity or the level of writing proficiency could be identified. In other words, more research is needed to examine the effect of the fluency of the writing process on the other factors, but also to get more insight into the cognitive weight of the pragmatic adequacy condition in task complexity. To date, very limited research has focused on both the writing process and the written product (Van Weijen et al., 2009). By including the process data in our analyses, this research project will be able to make an important contribution to the still emerging theoretical framework for reading-to-write tasks for professional communication in a foreign language.

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## Appendix 1: Task example

### Reading-to-write task (Dutch/Spanish)

#### Context

In this session you will write two texts for pupils of Dutch/English/French/Spanish of the Royal Lyceum in Antwerp. These texts should address the sixth-graders in general secondary education. The teachers of the different languages wish to include your contribution in a special edition of the high school newspaper.

The aim is to write a summary based on three source texts selected by the teachers. You will receive two different tasks: one for each language in which you will have to write the synthesis.

#### Preparation

Copy the set next to your name from the network to the hard disk of your computer.

1. Open H:\Inputlog\Sets
2. Copy the correct folder to the desktop of your computer

#### Task

Write a brief and coherent synthesis based on the following three source texts:

- An extract from a report of the European Union
- A webtext from the European Union
- A newspaper article from De Standaard/The Independent/Le Soir/El País

**The task can contain between 200 words minimum and 250 words maximum. You have 40 minutes for each task.**

#### Sources

You can use other sources such as:

- Online dictionaries
- Internet (except social media and e-mail)



## Appendix 2: Benchmark instrument

Por un lado, el cambio climático tiene grandes consecuencias para la agricultura europea, pero por otro lado, la agricultura es responsable de la mayor parte de las emisiones de metano y de óxido nítrico. Además, forma la mayor partida de gastos (aproximadamente 60 mil millones). Por eso el sector agrario tiene una prioridad en la política agrícola de la UE. También debe reducir sus emisiones y adaptarse a las repercusiones previstas del cambio climático. Para ello la UE quiere continuar con la seguridad alimentaria, apoyar la gestión sostenible de recursos naturales y la lucha contra el cambio climático, e informar sobre la restauración de los ecosistemas. El comisario de la UE aboga por una revisión del sistema, en el cual un 30% de la ayuda directa para agricultores deberá ser destinada a medidas ecológicas, como la conservación de praderas y la rotación de cultivos.

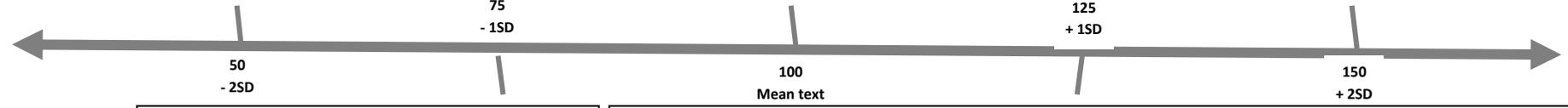
**Content:** The text contains a lot of information, but in a chaotic, and even contradictory, manner. A clear focus is lacking, because main and side-issues are mixed. **(Visual) structure:** There is very little textual coherence. Visually, there is no structure at all, since the text has no title, subtitles, topic sentence or paragraphs. **Style and language:** Stylistically this text is very weak, mainly because of the incorrect use of several discursive connectors. Furthermore, there are numerous lexical and concordance errors.

**Nueva estrategia de bienestar animal de la UE**  
Gracias al Tratado de Lisboa de la Unión Europea se reconoce a los animales como seres sensibles, entendiendo que son capaces de sentir placer y dolor. A fin de reflejar este reconocimiento, la Comisión Europea ha adoptado una nueva estrategia para mejorar el bienestar animal en explotaciones ganaderas, en parques zoológicos y en laboratorios (los animales de compañía no fueron incluidos en la estrategia). La nueva estrategia refleja también que en los últimos años cada vez más ciudadanos europeos son profundamente sensibles al bienestar animal. Las nuevas medidas son basados a los resultados de la primera estrategia sobre el bienestar animal del año 2010. La UE provee 70 millones de euros para ofrecer mejores condiciones alojamiento, alimentación y transporte de dos mil millones de aves y trescientos millones de mamíferos del sector ganadero. Además, la estrategia procura que los mercados y los consumidores tengan en cuenta los aspectos de bienestar animal a la hora de comprar alimentos. Concretamente, la UE apuesta tres medidas para mejorar el tratamiento de animales: (1) mejor formación de veterinarios que inspeccionan las explotaciones agrícolas, (2) recopilación de consejos sobre las mejores prácticas ganaderas (3) castigo riguroso para aquellos que no sigan las directivas. Además, la Comisión Europea estudia la creación de una red de centros de referencia mediante coordinar la investigación del bienestar animal, formar a los funcionarios para que apliquen la observancia de la legislación, facilitar información actualizada a la Comisión y a los Estados miembros.

**Content:** The information is presented clearly and accurately. However, the introduction is rather one-sided. **(Visual) structure:** There is a clear visual structure in the text, with a title and paragraphs. Nevertheless, the internal structure of the paragraphs is not convincing. Especially the second paragraph is not clear with respect to the difference between the adopted strategy and the proposed measures. **Style and language:** The text takes into account the target audience with respect to the choice of words. However, the use of discursive connectors is rather limited, and the text shows numerous language errors

**Energía renovable en la Unión Europea**  
Hoy en día, la mayoría de la energía en Europa proviene todavía de combustibles fósiles. Sin embargo, la producción de energía renovable (tal como la energía eólica, la hidroeléctrica, la biomasa y las energías solares térmicas) ha aumentado mucho en los últimos años, y la Unión Europea intenta favorecer este cambio. Para hacer las fuentes de energía renovable más importantes y rentables, la U.U.E.E. decidió que la energía renovable debe formar un 20% del mercado en toda la U.U.E.E. en 2020. Cada país recibe sus propios objetivos, que son legalmente vinculantes. Naturalmente, la Unión Europea toma en cuenta la situación específica en cada región. Las fuentes de energía renovable tienen muchas ventajas. La energía solar, por ejemplo, se produce de manera silenciosa, puede generar tanto calor como electricidad y, sobre todo, proviene de una fuente gratuita e inagotable. Además, las instalaciones no exigen mucho mantenimiento y se pueden instalar fácilmente. Cada fuente de energía renovable tiene sus propias ventajas, pero todas tienen en común que son relativamente buenas para el medio ambiente. En Bélgica, los movimientos ecologistas piensan que el gobierno puede hacer mucho más para pasar a la energía renovable. Pretenden que Bélgica puede reconvertirse completamente a la energía renovable para 2050, sin perder prosperidad. El programa Energía-Inteligente Europa de la U.U.E.E. coordina la promoción de energías renovables, y puede ayudar a eliminar barreras administrativas posibles.

**Content:** The subject of the text is clear from the beginning and well-focused on the target audience. The text shows a good balance between density and length. **(Visual) structure:** This text shows a very instructive structure, that goes from general information to applied data and a concrete example. Visually, the structure could be improved by adding a subtitle or topic sentences. **Style and language:** In spite of some minor language mistakes, the style of this text is varied and pleasant to read. Furthermore, the formulation is positive, which gives an optimistic tone to the content.



La Unión Europea (UE) es líder mundial en el ámbito de las energías renovables y el sector goza ya de una importancia económica considerable. El desarrollo de las energías renovables ha aumentado. Por eso la producción también ha aumentado de forma constante durante la última década. Sin embargo, este desarrollo no tiene una distribución equilibrada dentro de la UE. Además, la energía renovable solo representa una pequeña parte del total de energía europea. Esto quiere decir que aún no son competitivas. De todos modos, en condiciones favorables, la energía eólica, la hidroeléctrica, la biomasa y las energías solares térmicas son fuentes económicamente viables. Aunque la UE sea líder mundial en el ámbito de energía fotovoltaica, se necesita una mayor demanda para mejorar las economías de escala. Para que aumente la cuota de mercado y para que sean verdaderas opciones rentables la UE ha redactado una directiva con una serie de objetivos nacionales que suman un 20% en la UE. Todos los Estados miembros de la UE deberán cumplir esta directiva para 2020.

**Content:** This text contains relevant content, but the links between the different elements are awkward. Although the given information is correct, lexical confusion (desarrollo/producción) complicates a swift comprehension. **(Visual) structure:** The absence of a title makes it difficult for the reader to identify easily the subject of the text. In spite of the absence of paragraphs, the use of several connectors give structure to the content. **Style and language:** This text shows hardly any language mistakes, but several punctuation errors, that inhibit a smooth reading. Syntax is rather simple.

**El bienestar animal**  
Los ciudadanos europeos son profundamente sensibles al bienestar animal y cada año, se preocupan más. Por eso, la Comisión Europea ha desarrollado una estrategia de bienestar animal.  
*Repercusiones de la nueva estrategia*  
La nueva estrategia de bienestar animal aspira a ofrecer mejores condiciones de alojamiento, alimentación, transporte y sacrificio a los animales europeos. También hay reglas para los animales utilizados con fines de experimentación y animales que viven en parques zoológicos.  
*Tres formas estratégicas*  
La nueva estrategia propone tres formas para mejorar el tratamiento de animales:  
1.Simplificar la reglamentación: la reglamentación tiene que ser comprensible para todos aquellos que deben leerla. Si eso no es el caso, es imposible alcanzar los objetivos.  
2.Apoyar la cooperación internacional: la UE promueve el bienestar animal durante grandes campañas internacionales.  
3.Informar mejor al consumidor: la UE provee información sobre el bienestar animal para los consumidores.  
*¿Una estrategia buena?*  
Sin embargo, la organización de derechos de los animales GAIA dice que la nueva estrategia europea no es tan buena. "No logramos saber cómo la Comisión quiere desarrollar la educación en materia de bienestar animal, a qué grupo meta se dirige ni qué forma tendrá la ley de bienestar animal", dice Vandenbosch de GAIA. Además, no presta atención a los animales de compañía.

**Content:** The content is very clear and very well adapted to the target audience. **(Visual) structure:** The visual structure that not only uses a title, a topic sentence, and section headings, but also the typographical variation (italics) and the enumeration, ensures a swift comprehension of the topic. On the other hand, the use of all these strategies together in a rather small text, makes the final product look more like a leaflet than an explanatory text. **Style and language:** Stylistically, this text is rather limited, given the (almost) absence of subordinate clauses. The language mistakes are mainly of a lexical nature. For instance, the heading 'Repercusiones de la nueva estrategia' is misleading, since the paragraph does not comment on the consequences, but on the objectives of the strategy. Furthermore, some formulations/words are too plain (e.g. Hay, Bueno), and there are punctuation problems.

### Appendix 3: Analytic assessment instrument with scale

<b>Around 50</b>	<b>Around 75</b>	<b>Around 100</b>	<b>Around 125</b>	<b>Around 150</b>
<u>Sentence level</u> Very incorrect word use Very incorrect use of connectors Very incomplete sentences Very incorrect syntax Excessive grammar errors Very bad style negative formulation, passive sentences, redundancies, etc.) Excessive enumerations	<u>Sentence level</u> Incorrect word use Incorrect use of connectors Incomplete sentences Incorrect syntax Numerous grammar errors Bad style, negative formulation, passive sentences, redundancies, etc.) Numerous enumerations	<u>Sentence level</u> <u>Acceptability of the following criteria</u> Word use Use of connectors Completeness of the sentences Syntax Grammatical precision Style (negative formulation, passive sentences, redundancies, etc.) Number of enumerations	<u>Sentence level</u> Correct word use Correct use of connectors Complete sentences Correct syntax Few grammar errors Good style (positive formulation, active sentences, no redundancies, etc.) Few enumerations	<u>Sentence level</u> Very correct word use Very correct use of connectors Very complete sentences Very correct syntax No grammar errors Excellent style (positive formulation, active sentences, no redundancies, etc.) Very few enumerations
<u>Text level</u> Very incorrect paragraphing Very incorrect transition between paragraphs Very poor lay-out Absence of title Absence of subtitles Absence of a topic sentence	<u>Text level</u> Incorrect paragraphing Incorrect transition between paragraphs Poor lay-out Presence of title And/or Presence of subtitles And/or Presence of a topic sentence	<u>Text level</u> <u>Acceptability of the following criteria</u> Division in paragraphs Transition between paragraphs Lay-out Presence of title And/or Presence of subtitles And/or Presence of a topic sentence	<u>Text level</u> Correct paragraphing Correct transition between paragraphs Good lay-out Presence of title And/or Presence of subtitles And/or Presence of a topic sentence	<u>Text level</u> Very correct paragraphing Very correct transition between paragraphs Excellent lay-out Presence of title And/or Presence of subtitles And/or Presence of a topic sentence
<u>Discourse level</u> Very confusing Very hermetic Very plagiarized Very incomplete Very vague Insufficient distinction between main and side-issues Completely not adapted to target audience	<u>Discourse level</u> Confusing Hermetic Plagiarized Incomplete Vague Unclear distinction between main and side-issues Not adapted to target audience	<u>Discourse level</u> <u>Acceptability of the following criteria</u> Coherence and logic Accessibility Originality Completeness Clearness Distinction between main and side-issues Adapted to target audience	<u>Discourse level</u> Coherent and logic Accessible Original Complete Clear Good distinction between main and side-issues Well adapted to target audience	<u>Discourse level</u> Very coherent and logic Very accessible Very original Very complete Very clear Excellent distinction between main and side-issues Very well adapted to target audience