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Abstract

This article reports the findings of a research study carried out in 2006. The purpose of the study was to design and implement a didactic proposal within the postulates of the Communicative Approach, aimed at improving the writing skills of ninth grade-high school monolingual students in Cali, Colombia, through narrative writing. The data was gathered through a diagnostic stage and an intervention stage. The findings show that after the intervention stage, students improved their ability to write in English: their texts exhibited creativity and contained fewer surface errors. Students' attitude also changed positively and they were more interested in and committed to writing in English. These findings are in line with those in previous studies which suggest that low-level proficiency students can be gradually introduced to writing by offering them a clear purpose to write, choosing topics from their daily life, and guiding them through their wring process.

Key words: Writing, English as a Foreign Language, written production, Communicative Approach

Resumen

Este artículo presenta los resultados de una investigación realizada en el año 2006. El objetivo era diseñar e implementar una propuesta didáctica dentro de las concepciones del Enfoque Comunicativo con el propósito de mejorar las habilidades de escritura de un grupo de estudiantes de noveno grado de bachillerato de un colegio monolingüe de la ciudad de Cali, Colombia, a través de textos narrativos. Los datos para el estudio fueron recolectados implementando una etapa de diagnóstico y una etapa de intervención. Los resultados muestran que después de la etapa de intervención, los estudiantes mejoraron su habilidad para escribir en inglés: sus textos reflejaban creatividad y pocos errores de forma. La actitud de los estudiantes también cambió positivamente. Ellos se mostraron más interesados y comprometidos con el escribir en inglés. Estos hallazgos concuerdan con los de estudios anteriores que sugieren que los estudiantes con un bajo nivel de proficiencia pueden ser gradualmente introducidos a la escritura proveyéndoles un propósito claro para escribir, exponiéndolos a temas de su vida diaria y acompañándolos a través de su proceso de escritura.

Palabras clave: Escritura, inglés como lengua extranjera, producción escrita, enfoque comunicativo.

Introduction

It is frequently heard that Colombian people do not distinguish themselves for being voracious readers. This problem originates in schools, where the value of reading and writing is not usually emphasized. Thus, if this interest does not exist in the mother tongue, it is less probable for it to emerge when it comes to learning a foreign language. Many English teachers still think that writing should be the last skill to be developed in their students, mainly because of the students' low proficiency in the foreign language. In most cases, high school teachers do not make any emphasis on writing because they prefer to spend class time in grammar exercises. Unfortunately, they think that this provides students with the type of knowledge they need to learn how to write. Besides, most teachers believe that there is no major student interest in learning how to write in English, for students do not see any benefit in it.



Campus Universidad Autónoma de Occidente, 2009

But it is the teacher's task to show his students the benefits of learning to write. Therefore, it is necessary to ask how we can offer students different activities that motivate them to love English, allow them to understand the importance of writing, and provide them with a hands-on writing experience in the foreign language.

Background studies

Locally, there is not much research in the field of writing in English as a foreign language at the high school level. The existing studies in this area have been carried out mostly at the Universidad del Valle in Santiago de Cali.

One of these studies is Castillo's (2000), aimed at reminding teachers and students of the importance of writing in daily life. Castillo describes the models and strategies proposed by Cassany (1989), and even though she does not focus on writing in English as a foreign language, her statements and proposals are worth considering. Cassany's models conceive writing as the integration of several sub-processes that include planning, rereading and rewriting. Castillo implemented these models and strategies by implementing a diagnosis stage that included work on letters, descriptions, and short stories. She found that some students had the ability to communicate through writing, even if they made mistakes in the formal aspects of the language such as mechanics, cohesion, syntax and vocabulary. According to her study, the greatest difficulty the students had dealt with completeness. "Most of the students mixed one idea with others and wrote meaningless sentences" (p. 54). Based on these findings, the writer suggests that teachers pay more attention to the way they revise students' papers since teachers usually focus on the formal aspects of the language rather than on communicative features. She also recommends that beginning writers start with familiar and motivating topics. Finally, she designed a didactic proposal as a means to respond to the students' needs.

In her study An Analysis of writing in English as a Foreign Language and the Implementation of Teaching Alternatives in Ninthgrade students at a Monolingual School in Cali, Davila (2000) looked at what high school students with an elementary level of English proficiency can do when writing in English. Focusing on a methodology centered in classroom research, she collected some samples of the students' texts and using classroom observations she sought to establish a relationship with other studies on the same subject. She found that when writing in a second language, these students used their previous knowledge they have acquired in their mother tongue. She also discovered that each student used different strategies to attain results. Based on this, she claims that it is necessary for students to understand the purpose of writing activities for them to attain instructional goals.

Another important study is Rosero's and Quintero (2000). Their main purpose was to involve students in the writing process and make teachers conscious of the important role they play in helping students improve their writing skills. The authors started by assuming that the students did not have a good English proficiency level. Therefore, they implemented a diagnosis stage to assess the students' writing abilities. After finding that the students wrote at a low level, the authors decided to carry out some classroom interventions followed by a post-test to see how much the students had improved. The results showed that after the interventions

the students wrote more coherent and more cohesive texts.

Rosero and Quintero are categorical in stating that "writing requires time, devotion, and is a matter of habits and discipline" (p. 93). They also think that it is necessary that teachers motivate students with clear instructions about what they are expected to do and use interesting and familiar topics as a way to foster students' liking for writing in English.

Theoretical Framework

Writing in English as a Foreign Language

Theory dealing with writing in English as a Foreign Language is relatively recent and most of it is based on findings on writing in English as a Second Language. The main reason for this is that writing was taken as a simple activity: put the oral code into written words. According to Silva (2000), the history of ESL writing started in 1945 with a succession of approaches to writing in English. In this period, the most influential were the controlled composition approach, the current-traditional approach, the process approach and the English for academic purposes approach.

Silva identifies the main features of each of these approaches. The controlled composition approach is seen as a mixture of conceptions between structuralist linguistics and behaviorist psychology. Thus, it is assumed that language is speech and that learning is habit formation. Given these notions, "writing was regarded as a secondary concern, as reinforcement of oral habits." (p. 29). The most common activity in this approach consisted in giving students a model text and then ask them to rewrite it by making changes in gender, number, tense or voice. The text models used in this approach are usually distant



Campus Universidad Autónoma de Occidente,

from the students' likes and needs. In addition, the students only have contact with the finished product so they do not have the chance to discover the process behind it. However, it is useful to recognize that habit formation is not totally fruitless when it is not the only method used in the classroom, since sometimes students, especially beginning ones, learn things through repetition.

There is consensus among teachers in that writing cannot be taught just by replacing gender, number or verb tense in a text. Writing is much more than this. Students have their own ideas, styles and ways of expressing thoughts. Therefore, imposing a model contradicts this view.

The current-traditional approach states that language and culture patterns affect the way people think and that such patterns consequently affect writing. In light of this, writing is regarded as the organization of complex sentences and paragraphs. Learning to write, then involves becoming skilled in identifying, internalizing, and constructing these patterns. Here, attention is also given to types of paragraph development such as illustration, exemplification, and comparison. Essay develop-



Campus Universidad Autónoma de Occidente, 2009

ment is also important as well as organizational patterns (narration, description, exposition, and argumentation).

From the previous discussion, one could conclude that one of the main disadvantages of the current-traditional approach is its focus on form, not on content. Students must pay attention to well-constructed paragraphs, unusual vocabulary and prescribed patterns. Additionally, texts are usually very complex, thus posing a major difficulty for students to get the writer's ideas.

Writing within the Communicative Approach

The communicative Approach in Language Teaching became popular in Europe in the 70's. According to this conception of language, oral and written communication is the main goal in teaching a foreign or a second language. In *The Teaching of English as Communication* Widdowson makes a comparison between the traditional definition of writing and its conception established by the Communicative approach

Essentially what is taught by this approach is the ability to compose correct sentences. The difficulty is that the ability to compose correct sentences is not the only ability we need to communicate. Communication only takes place when we make use of sentences to perform a variety of different acts of an essential nature. Thus we do not communicate by composing sentences, but by using sentences to make statements of different kinds. describe, record, classify and so on, or to ask questions, make requests, give orders. (1981:117)

Raimes (1983) echoes Widdowson's idea when claiming that the communicative approach allows students to behave like real writ-

ers. Students are given the chance to think about the purpose of their text, an audience, and a context for it. For these authors, the real elements of writing make the difference. Students need to feel and know that a text has a purpose and that they are writing for someone. In other words, their writing has to make sense to them, it needs to be significant for them.

Writing as a process

Some of the characteristics or elements of the approach that sees writing as a process have already been mentioned here. However, it is the main objective of this section to give readers a more clear idea of what writing as a process means and its main features.

In writing as a process, the emphasis is on what a student goes through in composing a text, not on the final product.

According to Raimes, composing means expressing ideas, conveying meaning. In other words, students are challenged to follow a process in which they really need to think of ideas, coherence, cohesion, audience, meaning, etc. The teacher functions as a guide, helping them to generate ideas, draft, revise, edit, and proofread and is aware of his students' likes and dislikes since no writing comes to be significant if it is not pleasant to the author.

Silva (2000: 31) believes that "the introduction of the process approach seems to have been motivated by dissatisfaction with controlled composition and the current traditional approach." Yet, even though the reason for the appearance of the process approach is not clear, what we do know is the gains it has brought with it, for it offers opportunities for creativity and thinking in the composition realm. While seeing writing as a process, students understand that writing is

not a one-step activity and that it requires time for reflection. They have the chance to reformulate their ideas when shaping the text.

Writing is a complex, recursive, and creative activity which is very similar for both first and second language writers. However, this similarity has come to be criticized. For instance, most English learners feel that writing in the mother tongue is easier and less complicated than writing in the second or foreign language and, consequently, student texts exhibit a better development when they are written in the mother tongue than when they are written in a language other than the author's. This has led scholars to believe that L2 writers' texts show a simpler style of writing than L1 writers'. For instance, L2 writers' sentences often include more coordination, less subordination, and less noun modification. In addition, it is known that L2 writers' compositions do not include literary figures and the vocabulary is simpler than L1 writers' vocabulary.

Although in the process approach the writer's composing strategies are to be emphasized, this should not be understood as neglect for *form*. In fact, form needs to be an important part of a text and as such, the writer must pay attention to it. Surface elements of writing like punctuation, grammar, and spelling make a text readable. Still, focus on form should be delayed until revision, when drafting is complete.

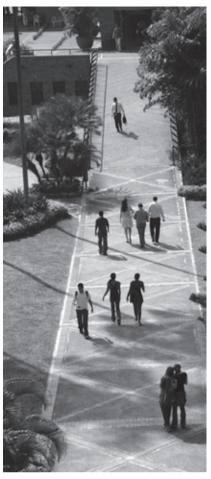
White & Arndt present the stages a good writer is recommended to follow when composing:

Generating ideas or Brainstorming. It allows the writer to organize all the ideas he has for a given topic. To assist in generating ideas at this initial stage, there are two main kinds of discovery techniques: guided and unguided techniques. A gui-

- ded technique involves a set of questions given to the writer in order to facilitate the emergence of ideas. In the unguided techniques, writers generate their ideas by themselves. As we all know, reading is the best way to generate ideas. Therefore, a good idea is to have the students read several texts in class in order to facilitate them this stage.
- Focusing. This stage helps the student to find what he really has to say about something. The lack of such a focus has two main consequences. First, the organization of ideas will be very difficult for the writer because there will be no central idea. Second, the writer will find it difficult to follow his way through the text and so he may react negatively to the task at hand. In focusing, another possibility is to consider the purpose and the audience of the text. The answer to this can guide the writer towards the central idea. Once the writer knows the purpose of his writing, he feels that what he is doing has a meaning, that he is not just writing to submit the product of another classroom activity.
- Structuring: In writing, the author does not have a direct interaction with his audience, but a mental image of it. Therefore, it is necessary that the writer select and arrange information—both factual and linguistic—in such a way as to avoid a sense of confusion in readers. This is possible by making vocabulary choices and using a certain style and tone, among others.
- Drafting: the writer moves from pre-writing to the stages where he actually puts his pen to work. He writes his first draft.
- Revising: the writer is expected to check his work for correct-



Campus Universidad Autónoma de Occidente,



Campus Universidad Autónoma de Occidente, 2009

- ness at different levels: cohesion, coherence, syntax, vocabulary, mechanics, spelling, etc. As result of this, the writer may find that several changes are necessary and so he will have to come up with subsequent drafts, until he feels satisfied.
- Proofreading: This is the stage for confirmation that the changes identified in the previous stage are actually made. Once this is done, the writer can ask someone else to read his work, in order to get additional feedback that may be useful in improving the quality of the final draft or end product. Yet whether the writer has someone to read his text before writing a final draft or not, it is his responsibility to make sure that what he had planned to say is what he actually said and said it the best way possible. This means that a writer has to become his own main critic.

Teachers that adopt this approach to writing understand that writing is not a linear process. Writers must go back and forth between stages, making decisions at all levels. It is through process writing that old and new ideas are arranged to obtain a product.

It is important to state that in spite of all its advantages, caution must be taken when implementing the process approach, for one thing. Beginning students will not suddenly turn into intermediate writers as result of their being exposed to a series of writing tasks. To use White's and Arndt words, "What process-focused activities will do is help students develop in ways which are appropriate to and fulfilling for their level of language proficiency." (1991:3)

In short, English teachers do not have to adopt just one approach to writing teaching. In fact, any approach and method can be potentially useful, according to the student's needs and language level. Then, it is the teacher's responsibility to decide which approach or approaches are more convenient for his teaching situation.

Defining narrative

According to the Communicative Approach, the purpose of a narrative text is to entertain, to tell a story, or to provide an aesthetic literary experience. A narrative text is based on life experiences and is person-oriented, using dialogue and familiar language.

Types of narrative texts

There are different types of narratives. They can be imaginary, factual or a combination of both. They may include fairy stories, mysteries, science fiction, romances, horror stories, adventure stories, fables, myths and legends, historical narratives, ballads, slice of life, personal experience.

Structure of a narrative text

The traditional structure of a narrative text consists of Exposition, Development, Crisis and Denouement. These stages are also known as Beginning, Middle and End. Yet, some experts have expanded these stages. For instance, the Standards of Literacy in the UK presents several categories to describe the structure of a narrative text:

- Opening introduces characters in setting;
- Build up characters are doing something;
- Problem something goes wrong;
- Events characters try to sort it out;
- Resolution characters sort it out:

• End - characters reflect on what has happened.

Labov (1972) gives a more complete structure of a narrative text. According to him, a narrative text must contain:

- 1.Abstract
- 2. Orientation
- 3. Complicating action
- 4. Evaluation
- 5. Result or resolution
- 6. Coda.

The *abstract* "encapsulates the point of the story"; that is, gives a reason for telling it, or for the reader to listen—"a funny thing happened to me". Orientation, complicating action, and result or resolution are the same as exposition, development, crisis and denouement of literary narratives. Coda is the device the narrator uses to indicate closure, such as "I hope I never see anything like that again" or "And they all lived happily ever after" or "And that was that." Labov refers to evaluation as "the means used by the narrator to indicate the point of the narrative," to justify the claims in the "abstract". Evaluative devices include direct statements, but more importantly, they include "secondary structures" throughout the narrative. They include responses to the action presented as part of the story ("I closed my eyes and thought I was going to die").

Methodology

This study is based on a qualitative design and was carried out following the Action Research paradigms.

According to Kemmis and Henry (1989), in Cardenas (2000: 2-3), "Action Research is defined as a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social or educational practices, as well as



Campus Universidad Autónoma de Occidente, 2009

their understanding of these practices and the situations in which these practices are carried out." Cardenas adds that Action Research involves the collection and analysis of data related to some aspect of our professional practice, such as the application and effects of teaching methods, learning strategies, cognitive styles, classroom interaction, and rules to be followed by teachers and learners, among others.

Below are the steps usually followed in Classroom Action Research:

- 1. Identify an issue, interest or problem;
- 2. Seek knowledge;
- 3. Plan an action:
- 4. Implement the action;
- 5. Observe the action;
- 6. Reflect on your observations;
- 7. Revise the plan.

Contextual framework

The study was carried out at a public institution located in the Melendez neighborhood, in Cali. This institution operates both in the morning and in the afternoon. As it occurs in most public institutions



Campus Universidad Autónoma de Occidente,

of the country, there are 45 or 50 students in a classroom originally designed for 30 or less students. Most of the students belong to a low social stratum and live nearby. The elementary school section functions in the morning and the high school section in the afternoon. There are 882 students in the afternoon and 339 students in the morning.

According to the PEI (Institutional Educational Project), the mission of the school is to offer formal education services aimed at training people that are able to get into the work market as either employers or company administrators.

Even though the school does not have a big physical space, it looks well structured and comfortable.

The school has two college-graduate English teachers, a small library, a language laboratory with 15 computers, a TV set, a radio set, and printed material donated by other institutions. The computers have a special program given by the government called *English Discoveries* which allows the students the possibility to learn and practice English. In their English classes, the students use textbooks or dictionaries only when these are available in the library.

The subjects of the study were 40 ninth-grade students. Most of them were in their late sixteen, lived in neighborhoods near school, and belonged to a low social stratum. They have a low-intermediate English level that makes it possible for them to profit from different activities considered for the development of the didactic English writing unit.

In carrying out the study, the following stages were considered:

Diagnosis stage

This was aimed at determining the level of the students' writing skills and identifying their attitude toward English writing. The instruments used to elicit information included the following:

Semi-structured student survey. It was aimed at finding whether the students liked or disliked English and writing in English, establishing the contact the students have with English, and the frequency with which they use it. The survey was administered to thirty-two students and consisted of seven questions.

Semi-structured teacher survey. It was aimed at establishing the conception the teacher had about writing in English, the methodology used for teaching English, and his view of his students' learning style. The teacher holds a university degree in Foreign Languages teaching and a Specialization degree in Desarrollo de la Inteligencia y Educación. He has been a high school teacher at this school for fifteen years.

Direct class observations. Twelve class observations were carried out, forty-five minutes each. The purpose of the observations was three-fold. First, to determine the students writing skills in English, second, identify their attitude towards writing in English, and third, identify and analyze the difficulties students had when they were actually writing.

Short in-class writing workshops. In order to continue with the diagnosis stage three writing workshops were organized. These workshops were prepared with the purpose of observing the students' ability to write in English, their attitude towards writing and their response to the teacher's methodology. In each workshop, the students were asked to compose a narrative text.

The results of this phase, which are explained later, allowed us to design the instructional writing unit of the intervention stage.

Intervention stage

An instructional writing unit was designed and implemented, based on the results of the diagnosis stage. The main purposes of this Writing Unit were to propose and implement different communicative strategies, activities or exercises aimed at improving the students' English writing skills.

At the beginning of this stage, the students had a period of familiarization with writing in English. The activities included completing formats, underlining linking words, evaluating, and comparing texts. Then the students were exposed to the process of generating ideas, focusing, structuring, drafting, evaluating, and revising.

The formal part of the language was also taken care of, so each one of the texts presented in class was a source for understanding vocabulary and grammar structure.

The didactic writing unit comprised seven lesson plans, each consisting of different activities. For each lesson plan, information was given as to the school grade it was intended, time to be developed, the stage in the writing process the lesson focuses on, the lesson objectives, the resources, and the teaching procedure.

Results

Following are the findings of the analysis of the information gathered through the diagnosis stage and the intervention stage.

Diagnosis stage

Student survey

A five-item survey was admin-

istered to 32 students, in a class period.

Like or dislike for English and its reasons. Eighty-five percent of the students said that they liked English, being personal growth their main reason. The other 15 percent said that they did not like English because it was not an interesting subject and that they did not see any benefit in learning it. As can be noticed, most of the students think that English is important and that it should be taken into account because it promotes their personal development.

For the students, asking and answering questions was the most common activity carried out in the classroom, followed by reading and translation. This shows that the methodology implemented by the teacher responded to traditional approaches.

As for the contact the students have with English, 62 percent expressed that they have no other contact with English different from classroom lessons. The other students said that they usually have contact with English when being with their friends, their family and through the internet. One possible reason for the high number of students who have no extra contact with English may be explained by the low interest they have for learning this language.

On the importance of writing, 96 percent of the students agreed on the significance of writing, being their personal growth the most common reason. Interesting enough is that even if students know that English is important, some of them do not seem to understand the specific benefits this could bring to their lives.

Most of the students, 93 percent, confessed that they would like to improve their English writing skills.



Campus Universidad Autónoma de Occidente,

However, this contradicts what students said in question one. On the one hand, students seem to be aware of the importance of writing in English and its benefits; on the other hand, and perhaps because of the methodology they are exposed to, they do not appear to be interested in learning the language.

Teacher Survey

The objective of this survey was to find out about the teacher's educational level, establish his conception about writing in English, his methodology, and the conception he has of his students' learning style.

The teacher graduated with a university degree in Modern Languages teaching and holds a graduate diploma in Intelligence Development and Education.

Concerning what he does in order to keep updated, he says that he usually reads books, uses the internet and attends seminars.

The most common activities he carries out in the classroom are workshops, video watching and use of the English Discoveries program for different purposes.

Methodology. He uses the Courseware computer language program, guided learning and interactive learning. According to him, there is no unique methodology to work with 45 students. He adds that there must be motivation and self-esteem for students to make any progress. Therefore, he favors an eclectic methodology. He further acknowledges that the language skills he intends to develop in his students are grammar structure recognition, reading, and listening.

Importance of writing in English. For this teacher writing is essential, but due to the lack of time and the priority of other skills—namely listening, speaking and reading—as well as the pressure

students have to pass the ICFES National Examination, he has never given writing the status it deserves.

Direct Class Observations

Twelve class observations were carried out, from October 29, 2004 to February 03, 2005. Each observation lasted from forty-five minutes to one and a half hours. The objectives of these observations were to determine the skills the students had when writing in English, identify the students' attitude toward writing in English, and determine and analyze the students' difficulties when they are actually writing.

The students were not used to writing in their English classes. From the teacher survey, we learned that there is not enough time to teach writing. What the students usually write in class are sentences taken from a photocopy or from a book. They are used to having classes where the main purpose is to have them develop some grammar workshops. However, it is expected that any grammar knowledge students can get be useful to their learning process.

As for the students' attitude towards writing in English, they did not seem to enjoy the classes. In some classes, the teacher proposed an activity and the students' response to it was negative. Also, and because of class size, it was difficult for the teacher to check that all of the students were working on the activity, so some of them simulated to be working but, in fact, they were drawing, doing another homework or just talking.

Short In-class Workshops

In general, it was observed that the students made some effort when writing. Many of their texts had a standard beginning and end. These were very simple texts exhibiting basic vocabulary, and even if the students were allowed to use their dictionaries, it was evident that they did not know how to put this learning tool to a good use.

The workshops revealed that although the students have several difficulties, they still have many interesting things to say but they need good guidance to express their ideas and make them comprehensible for readers.

Intervention Stage

Six lessons were designed for this stage. After giving students directions on what to do, why to do it, and how to do it, they were required to write a text of their own as an illustration of a model text read and discussed in class.

Along this last stage, it was observed that the students tried to make an effort in finishing their texts. Their compositions exhibited an appropriate development and contained essential details that allowed the reader to create a picture of the stories. It was also noticed that the texts contained fewer syntactic and semantic mistakes, when compared with those written in the diagnosis stage.

Conclusion

In spite of the several difficulties this group of ninth-graders experienced when actually faced with writing, their ability to compose intelligible texts developed gradually as they gained more confidence and were given more tools to better approach this process. Thus, the intervention stage was instrumental in helping them write more coherent and more cohesive texts. Therefore, it is believed that

process writing is a key approach in getting low-proficiency students to write, initially about topics they are familiar with, which allow them to see their own lives reflected on their writing. It is hoped, then, that this study be useful to other researchers working in similar contexts.

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Appendixes

Appendix 1.: Student Survey

La siguiente encuesta es realizada con el fin de conocer sus opiniones acerca del inglés como lengua extranjera.

1.	¿Le gusta el inglés?
	-Sí -No
	¿Por qué?
	¿Cuáles son las actividades que se realizan en la clase de inglés?
	Puede marcar varias opciones
	- Lectura de textos - Ejercicios de pronunciación
	- Ejercicios de gramática - Traducción de textos
	- Videos - Canciones
2.	Fuera del colegio, ¿tiene usted algún contacto con el inglés?
	-Sí -No
	Si su respuesta es positiva, indique en qué situaciones tiene ese con-
tac	to:
	-En Internet
	-Con su familia
	-Con los amigos
	-Otros ¿Cuáles?
3.	¿Cree usted que escribir en inglés es importante?
	-SíNo
	¿Por qué?
4.	¿Le gustaría aprender a escribir en inglés?
	-SíNo
	¿Por qué?

ΑĮ	ppendix 2: Teacher Survey
1.	¿Cuál es su nivel académico?
2.	¿Cuáles son los medios que usted utiliza para actualizarse en los nuevo enfoques de la enseñanza del inglés como lengua extranjera?
3.	¿Qué habilidades lingüísticas desarrollan sus estudiantes en clase?
4.	¿Qué tipo de actividades se realizan en su clase?
5.	¿Cuál es la metodología o metodologías que usted utiliza?
6.	¿Con cuál metodología piensa usted que los estudiantes aprenden mejor ¿Por qué?
	Para usted, ¿qué importancia tiene la escritura en inglés como habilidad
	a desarrollar en los estudiantes?