Feature Article

COMPARING OBJECTIVES AND ASSIGNMENTS IN ESL VERSUS MAINSTREAM COMPOSITION COURSES: IMPLICATIONS FOR WRITING PROGRAMS AND INSTRUCTORS

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First-year composition courses play an important role in preparing second language (L2) writers to meet the academic writing demands of the university setting. Traditionally, colleges and universities have addressed linguistic diversity in first-year composition by placing L2 writers either in mainstream courses or separate English as a second language (ESL) courses. Few studies have compared the two types. Using syllabi and assignments from courses across eight universities, this study compared ESL and mainstream courses in terms of their objectives and assignments. Findings indicated that mainstream courses were more varied in their objectives than were ESL courses. Assignments in both course types called for exposition and use of source text, but ESL assignments were less open ended, required less independent research, and allowed more writing on personal topics. These findings have implications for connecting L2 writers with instructional environments that meet their needs and prepare them for academic success in higher education contexts and beyond.

Keywords: college composition, second language writing, writing course assignments, writing course instruction, writing course objectives

With a growing number of international students enrolling in U.S. postsecondary institutions, scholars have become increasingly interested in the preparation of second language (L2) writers for meeting the academic writing demands of the university setting. Across the curriculum, college students are expected to engage in a range of general and discipline-specific writing tasks that vary in both purpose and genre (e.g., Moore & Morton, 2005). While these demands pose challenges for all students, they may be especially difficult for students whose first language is not English.

Composition courses, typically taken within the first year of study, play an important role in preparing L2 writers to meet these academic writing demands (Conference on College Composition and Communication, 2009). Colleges and universities vary considerably, however, in their approach to addressing linguistic diversity in college composition. Traditionally, L2 writers are placed either in mainstream composition courses with their "native" English-speaking (NES) peers or in separate English as a second language (ESL) courses. In this article, *mainstream courses* are defined as those composition courses "designed for and dominated by NES writers" (Silva, 1994, p. 38), while *ESL courses* are defined as those composition courses "designed and designated for ESL students" (p. 40).

In a seminal article on the placement of L2 writers in first-year composition courses, Silva (1994) suggested that mainstream and ESL courses present distinct opportunities and challenges for L2 writers. While mainstream courses may offer opportunities for L2 writers to interact with their NES peers, these

courses may not provide sufficient linguistic supports to prepare L2 students for meeting the academic writing demands of university coursework. Conversely, while ESL courses have the potential to meet the unique needs of L2 writers in a sheltered academic setting, these courses may also "raise the specter of segregation" (p. 40) between L2 writers and their NES peers and risk being labeled as a remedial alternative to mainstream composition courses.

More than two decades after Silva called attention to this issue, the appropriate placement of L2 writers in first-year composition remains an open question and an area ripe for further inquiry. For example, in the most recent edition of the *Handbook of Second and Foreign Language Writing*, Ferris (2016) describes the following:

> There is debate among composition specialists as to the "best" curricular path for L2 writers in higher education settings. Some argue that it is important for L2 students to be mainstreamed as soon as possible so that they can interact with L2 peers around their writing and accustom themselves to expectations beyond the often-sheltered world of the ESL program. Others assert that some students have specialized needs for assistance with their writing that are quite distinct from those of L1 writers, and that such students would benefit greatly from smaller classes designed for their specific developmental stage (e.g., spending more time on fewer assignments or providing more language-focused classroom instruction that would be less appropriate for L1 students). (p. 150)

In one of the earliest studies to compare mainstream and ESL courses, Braine (1996) found that, when given a choice, L2 writers were more likely to enroll in ESL courses, and L2 writers who opted for mainstream placements withdrew from those courses at significantly higher rates than their peers in ESL courses. Following Braine, studies have investigated students' placement preferences in relation to a variety of factors, including their language proficiency and linguistic/cultural identity (Costino & Hyon, 2007; Ortmeier-Hooper, 2008; Ruecker, 2011). Other studies have examined the assessment practices used by colleges and universities to place students in appropriate course types (see Crusan, 2014, for a critical review). Still another line of work has focused on the preparation of instructors for supporting L2 writers in composition courses (Matsuda, Saenkhum, & Accardi, 2013; Williams, 1995), highlighting what Matsuda (1999) has referred to as a "disciplinary division of labor" (p. 669) between ESL and composition specialists.

While these lines of work have contributed to our understanding of issues surrounding ESL and mainstream courses, little is known about what actually happens in each course type. The present study begins to fill this gap by comparing ESL and mainstream courses in terms of two aspects of their design: (a) course objectives and (b) course assignments. Course objectives refer to "broad goals, or aims, concerning the purpose of the course" as well as "particular knowledge and skills that learners will be expected to know or perform at the end of it" (Hyland, 2003, p. 100). Course assignments refer to the specific writing tasks that students are expected to complete in order to meet course objectives. Within this framework, the study addresses the following research questions:

- What are the stated objectives of ESL and mainstream composition courses, respectively?
- What are the characteristics of course assignments in ESL and mainstream composition courses, respectively?

Literature Review

We consider course objectives and course assignments to be critical aspects of course design, as they represent the purpose of these courses (i.e., course objectives) and the realization of their expectations (i.e., course assignments). We review the literature in each of these areas. This review is not intended to be

exhaustive, but rather to highlight both key issues in each area and limitations that inform the aims and design of the study.

Course Objectives

The objectives of composition courses are varied, reflecting diverse orientations toward writing and learning to write. Hyland (2003) provides a critical analysis of different foci around which L2 writing instruction is typically organized, including a focus on creative expression, genre, and content. Whereas a focus on creative expression encourages students to "find their own voice to produce writing that is fresh and spontaneous" (p. 8), a focus on genre is more concerned with students' control of the rhetorical structures needed to achieve a particular purpose in writing. A focus on content places greater emphasis on "what students are writing *about*" (p. 14) than the writing process itself.

Fulkerson (2005), in his review of the state of college composition at the turn of the century, also offers a survey of approaches. Specifically, he identifies three major approaches: (a) critical/cultural studies, (b) expressivism, and (c) procedural rhetoric. Whereas expressivism and procedural rhetoric are roughly equivalent to Hyland's focus on creative expression and genre, respectively, critical/cultural studies represents a new direction in college composition, as the goal of writing in these courses is "not 'improved writing' but 'liberation' from dominant discourse" (p. 660). Given this range of approaches, Fulkerson suggests that composition studies has become "a less unified and more contentious discipline" (p. 654).

While the body of work discussed above has surveyed the range of approaches adopted in composition courses (see also Hedgecock & Ferris, 2013; Hinkel, 2015; Matsuda, Cox, Jordan, & Ortmeier-Hooper, 2010), no studies have investigated whether ESL and mainstream courses differ in this regard. Moreover, this work is based largely on theoretical models of writing instruction rather than empirical analyses anchored in the writing classroom itself. Given that instructors are likely to adopt "an eclectic range of methods that represent several perspectives" (Hyland, 2003, p. 2), research that examines primary artifacts from these courses (e.g., course syllabi) could provide a more grounded and first-hand look at the actual objectives adopted in different types of composition courses.

Course Assignments

An extensive body of research has documented the range of academic writing tasks required by university coursework (Carroll & Dunkelblau, 2011; Collins, 2017; Hale, Taylor, Bridgeman, Carson, Kroll, & Kantor, 1996; Horowitz, 1986; Melzer, 2005; Moore & Morton, 2005). Broadly, these studies have been concerned with classifying the types of writing tasks assigned in disciplinary courses with the ultimate goal of informing the development of large-scale writing assessments, such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) (Hale et al., 1996; Moore & Morton, 2005), or devising composition course assignments that "simulate the essential characteristics of real university writing assignments" (Horowitz, 1986, p. 449). Fewer studies have focused their investigation on the types of tasks assigned in composition courses themselves.

Leki and Carson (1994, 1997) documented the types of writing tasks assigned in ESL composition courses and academic content courses. They found that tasks in ESL composition courses, unlike those found in academic content courses, required writing on personal topics and did not hold students accountable for demonstrating comprehension of source text. However, in addition to being more than two decades old, Leki and Carson's analyses relied only on self-reported data (i.e., surveys and interviews) and did not compare ESL and mainstream composition courses. Furthermore, because these studies were primarily concerned with comparing tasks assigned in composition courses with those assigned in the broader university community, they fall short of providing an in-depth picture of course assignments in either setting.

Significance of the Study

A more detailed and systematic analysis comparing different types of composition courses has the potential to inform college writing programs specifically and L2 writing instruction broadly. For college writing programs, students and administrators must have accurate information about the objectives and expectations associated with different course types in order to make well-informed placement decisions. Moreover, the fact that ESL and mainstream courses often count toward fulfilling the same first-year writing requirement for graduation may provide additional incentive for understanding their differences. For L2 writing instruction, especially L2 writing instruction for academic purposes, greater awareness of the multiple ways in which writing courses differ can lead to more coherently conceptualized and intentionally designed instructional approaches to meet the needs of L2 writers at any educational level (e.g., elementary and secondary education).

Method

Data were collected as part of a larger study comparing international nonnative-English-speaking undergraduate students' performance on the TOEFL Internet-based test writing tasks and their performance on writing tasks assigned in required composition courses at U.S. universities (Llosa & Malone, 2017, 2018). The larger study involved 103 students enrolled in required composition courses taught by 24 writing instructors across eight universities in the United States. All of the students were enrolled in either an ESL or a mainstream composition course, and both course types fulfilled a graduation requirement.

Data Collection and Analysis

Students participating in the larger study were asked to submit the syllabus and two course assignments from their composition course. Twenty-one syllabi (14 ESL, 7 mainstream) were collected. Course syllabi outlined the objectives of each course as well as the assignments students were expected to complete throughout the semester. Fifty-two course assignments (35 ESL, 17 mainstream) were also collected. Course assignments typically included a writing prompt, task requirements, and reference to any source text that students were expected to use to complete the assignment. All assignments counted toward students' grades in the course. Less formal writing tasks (e.g., outlines, summaries, freewrites) were not included in the study.

To address our first research question, we analyzed the course syllabi. Course objectives were located under a variety of different headings in the syllabi (e.g., course goals, purpose of course, learning objectives) but were typically found on the first page and described the aims of the course as well as what students should know and be able to do as a result of their participation. The syllabi were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, a technique for classifying text into categories that represent similar meanings (Weber, 1990). Specifically, we grouped the course syllabi into categories based on emerging similarities and differences in their stated objectives (Neuendorf, 2017). To address our second research question, we analyzed course assignments using a researcher-developed classification scheme, described in detail below. A summary of the classification scheme with definitions and illustrative examples for select categories can be found in Appendix A.

Classification Scheme for Course Assignments

In developing our classification scheme, we drew on several writing task classification schemes used in previous studies (Hale et al., 1996; Moore & Morton, 2005; Purves, Soter, Takala, & Vähäpassi, 1984). An important distinction, however, is that these schemes were developed to classify writing tasks from a

range of disciplines (e.g., business, psychology, engineering) and across different contexts (e.g., elementary education, secondary education, postsecondary education). Whereas the characteristics of writing tasks analyzed in these studies varied widely, course assignments in the present study were more homogeneous, as they were sampled from the more narrowly defined domain of college composition courses. For this reason, we needed to develop a scheme that captured important dimensions of difference among these assignments. Thus, while existing classification schemes guided our initial efforts, the development of our own classification scheme required a recursive approach whereby the scheme was revised and refined as new characteristics emerged. Ultimately, our classification scheme included the following eight characteristics: genre, rhetorical mode, use of source text, use of personal examples, choice of topic/text, locus of writing, length, and topical content. We describe each characteristic below.

The concept of *genre,* due to the multiple meanings that have been ascribed to it over the years, "suffers from variable and uncertain usage" (Swales, 1990, p. 1). To avoid theoretical difficulties associated with the term, Purves et al. (1984) defined genre in terms of the "conventional form associated with the product that is likely to result from the task" (p. 11). Following this definition, we included seven categories of genre in our classification scheme: essay, letter, literary/rhetorical analysis, book review, observation report, autobiography, and editorial.

Rhetorical mode referred to the "modes of discourse that assignments were to take" (Hale et al., 1996, p. 12) and consisted of the following categories: exposition, argument, narration with interpretation, and non-traditional. Exposition was used to describe course assignments that required students to develop a thesis and support it with evidence or examples. Argument was defined as a form of exposition that required students to take a stance on an issue with clearly defined sides (e.g., agree or disagree with a statement). Narration with interpretation required students to write about sequentially related events and interpret the meaning or importance of those events. Course assignments that could not be placed under any of these categories were classified as non-traditional (see Results section and Appendix A for examples of assignments in this category).

Use of source text signified how students were expected to use other texts, if at all, in completing the assignment. Four categories were identified: writing about or in response to text, drawing on evidence/ examples from text, none, and unspecified. The first category was used to describe assignments in which students were expected to write about text (e.g., by evaluating its effectiveness) or respond to text (e.g., by responding to the author's ideas). The second category also involved the use of source text, but rather than focusing on the texts themselves, these assignments required students to draw on evidence or examples from text to support their theses. The main distinction, then, between these two categories was the starting point: The first began with a text, which led to a thesis; the second began with an issue (e.g., education) or experience (e.g., a friendship) and used text to support a thesis on that issue or experience. Whereas assignments in the first category provided students with the focal text or texts, assignments in the second category sometimes required independent research. Thus, assignments in the second category were further classified based on whether text was provided in the assignment or collected by students. Assignments that did not require the use of source text or did not specify whether such texts were to be used were classified as none and unspecified, respectively.

Use of personal examples denoted whether students were explicitly allowed or encouraged to use examples from personal experience in their writing. Use of personal examples could be in addition to or in place of source text.

Choice of topic/text was used to describe the extent to which assignments allowed students to choose the topic or text on which they would be writing. The following categories were identified: open-ended, options provided, and no choice.

Locus of writing referred to whether the assignment was completed outside of class or during class time.

Length referenced the expected number of double-spaced pages in 12-point Times New Roman font. The following ranges were used to classify the length of course assignments: 2–3, 4–5, 6–10, 11–15, and unspecified. When assignments provided a page range, we averaged the two numbers (e.g., 5 to 7 pages became 6) and then classified the assignment according to the ranges designated in our scheme.

Topical content referred to the subject matter of the assignment and included the following broad categories: media and culture; environment; education; writing about writing; diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice; identity and society; technology; multiple options; and other.

Results

Course Objectives

ESL composition courses. Although the ESL courses had different relative emphases, their overall objective was to prepare students for the academic writing necessary for success at the college level. Nearly all instructors highlighted critical reading and the integration of source text in writing as key skills needed for effective participation in the academic community. Instructors also emphasized a range of specific areas of focus for their courses, from more "global" issues of rhetorical organization and topic development to more "local" issues of grammar, vocabulary, and editing. They also described the process-oriented approach to writing instruction adopted in their courses whereby students would revise their writing over several drafts in response to feedback from the instructor and peers. Often, course objectives also specified a course theme around which reading and writing assignments throughout the semester would revolve. Instructors made explicit, however, that the theme was not the focus of instruction, but rather a context for developing writing skills. One instructor cautioned:

> We will read essays and articles that relate broadly to the topics of Happiness and Bias & Stereotypes. While the readings and class discussions are important and much class time will be devoted to them, these are not the course. The course is devoted to writing itself.

Mainstream composition courses. In comparison with ESL courses, mainstream courses were more varied in their objectives. The objectives of the seven mainstream courses fell into three broad categories, which shared certain characteristics with each other but differed in other respects. Courses in the first category (2 of 7) most closely resembled ESL courses, setting as their primary objective the preparation of students for college-level writing. The second category of courses (2 of 7) also considered writing to be the primary focus of instruction but viewed writing and rhetoric in a more dynamic sense. One instructor explicitly addressed how his course differed from other writing courses:

> This course begins with an alternate view that *all* writing represents a rhetorical act, which is to say that it is fundamentally social. Writing, in other words, depends on one's sense of others. No single class, therefore, can prepare you with one-size-fits-all writing skills. This class aims instead to provide you with a conceptual framework for approaching writing situations.

As shown in this excerpt, courses in this second category moved beyond introducing students to the genres and rhetorical modes most prevalent in college-level writing, as was typical of ESL courses, and instead emphasized how students could adapt their writing to a range of roles, audiences, and contexts.

The third category of courses (3 of 7) represented a significant departure from the first two (as well as from ESL courses), as courses in this category focused more on the content of the writing than on the writing process itself. The content of these courses centered on interdisciplinary issues, including poverty in America, cultural studies of food, and environmental ethics. These courses also emphasized the importance of critical thinking, making connections across ideas and questioning taken-for-granted assumptions. One instructor introduced her course as follows:

> This course will explore issues related to food: production, distribution, preparation, consumption, ethics, class. We'll examine the history of food writing, discuss contemporary food movements, and consider the impact our eating has on others. For most of us, food is pleasure. In this class, we'll ask how we can love to eat, but love to eat critically.

In some ways, the content of these courses resembled the themes typical of ESL courses, but mainstream courses of this third variety went beyond teaching writing *through* content. In other words, these courses viewed content and critical thinking not simply as a vehicle for writing instruction but as central to their objectives. Thus, both ESL courses and mainstream courses attended to writing, the content of writing, and critical thinking, but different aspects were foregrounded in their course objectives.

Course Assignments

Course assignments from ESL and mainstream courses were analyzed using the classification scheme described above. Table 1 summarizes the characteristics of assignments in ESL and mainstream courses.

Table 1

Characteristics of Course Assignments in ESL versus Mainstream Courses

	ESL *n* = 35	Mainstream *n* = 17
Genre		
Essay	29 (83%)	8 (47%)
Literary/rhetorical analysis	1 (3%)	4 (23%)
Letter	3 (9%)	0 (0%)
Observation report	0 (0%)	2 (12%)
Book review	2 (5%)	0 (0%)
Editorial	0 (0%)	2 (12%)
Autobiography	0 (0%)	1 (6%)
Rhetorical mode		
Exposition	26 (74%)	11 (65%)
Argument	7 (20%)	2 (11%)
Narration with interpretation	1 (3%)	1 (6%)
Non-traditional	1 (3%)	3 (18%)
Use of source text		
Writing about or in response to text	17 (48%)	4 (23%)
Drawing on evidence/examples from text	15 (43%)	12 (71%)
None	1 (3%)	1 (6%)
Unspecified	2 (6%)	0 (0%)
Use of personal examples		
Yes	20 (57%)	4 (24%)
No	15 (43%)	13 (76%)
Choice of topic/text		
Options provided	10 (29%)	3 (18%)
Open-ended	4 (11%)	9 (53%)
No choice	21 (60%)	5 (29%)
Locus		
Out of class	11 (65%)	17 (100%
In class	6 (35%)	0 (0%)
Length (in pages)		
2–3	15 (40%)	8 (47%)
4–5	4 (11%)	6 (35%)
6–10	2 (6%)	0 (0%)
11–15	0 (0%)	3 (18%)
Unspecified	14 (40%)	0 (0%)
Topical content		
Media and culture	3 (8%)	6 (35%)
Environment	1 (3%)	3 (18%)
Education	4 (11%)	1 (6%)
Writing about writing	3 (8%)	5 (29%)
Diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice	10 (29%)	2 (12%)
Identity and society	8 (23%)	0 (0%)
Other	6 (18%)	0 (0%)

ESL composition courses. In terms of genre, the majority of assignments were essays (83%), and the most prevalent rhetorical mode was exposition (74%), followed by argument (20%). All but two assignments involved the use of source text, with nearly half (48%) requiring students to write about or in response to text. Assignments in this category often required students to evaluate the effectiveness of a text, as shown in the following example:

> The purpose of this assignment is to analyze how effectively an author uses the rhetorical appeals ethos, pathos, and logos. You will analyze "Campus Parking: Love It or Leave It" (pp. 233–235). In a rhetorical analysis, you must: identify and discuss author, audience, and purpose; and identify and analyze the effectiveness of the rhetorical appeals.

A slightly smaller percentage of assignments (43%) required students to draw on source text for evidence and examples. Among these assignments, the majority (67%) provided students with the texts they were expected to use. Typically, these texts were listed in the syllabus and were previously read and discussed by students as part of the course. A relatively smaller percentage of assignments (27%) required students to seek out other texts through independent research and incorporate them into their writing. In most cases, these texts were meant to supplement the texts found in the course syllabus. In addition to integrating source text, more than half of assignments (57%) allowed students to use personal examples in their writing.

Furthermore, more than half of ESL course assignments (60%) did not allow students to choose the topic and/or text on which they were writing, while the remaining assignments provided options (29%) or, in even fewer cases, were left open-ended (11%). Regarding the locus of writing, approximately two thirds of assignments (65%) were completed outside of class and the other third (35%) during class time. The required length of these assignments was typically between two and three pages (40%), though a considerable number of assignments (40%) did not specify length. A smaller proportion of assignments required between four and five pages (11%) or between six and 10 pages (6%). The content of these assignments covered a wide range of topics, which were often linked to the course's theme. Diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice (29%) and identity and society (23%) ranked among the most frequently encountered topical content in ESL course assignments. This finding is unsurprising given that these courses are designed specifically for L2 writers, who represent a range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds and who are negotiating new identities as they navigate an unfamiliar context (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999).

Mainstream composition courses. In comparison with ESL course assignments, mainstream course assignments were more varied in terms of genre. Less than half of assignments (47%) were essays, and 23% were literary/rhetorical analyses. The remaining assignments were autobiographies, observation reports, or editorials. As was the case in ESL assignments, exposition (65%) and, to a lesser extent, argument (11%) were common rhetorical modes, but the proportion of mainstream assignments classified as non-traditional (18%) is notable. The rhetorical modes found in these assignments departed significantly from those most closely associated with academic writing in the university, as shown in the following example:

> This assignment begins with a recipe, but from there you'll have the freedom to head off in a direction that strikes you as relevant and exciting. Since the idea is to write a question-driven, researched piece, you'll be asked to let one good question lead to another good question, showing the reader your thought process as you grapple with questions you raise on the page.

As with ESL course assignments, mainstream course assignments also expected the use of source text. The majority of assignments (71%) required students to use evidence and examples from source text,

while a smaller percentage (23%) asked students to write about or in response to text. Interestingly, the reverse was the case for ESL course assignments, which favored writing about or in response to text. The following is an example of a mainstream course assignment that required the use of evidence and examples from text:

> The first unit of this course covers two questions about U.S. income distribution: what happened, and why does it matter? In this first paper you will formulate a more specific and narrow version of "what happened?" and answer it using data we will have explored together.

Among course assignments that required students to use evidence and examples from source text, more than half (58%) required independent research. Again, this is in contrast with ESL course assignments, which typically provided students with the texts they needed. An additional contrast relates to the use of personal examples. Whereas more than half of ESL course assignments encouraged students to use personal examples in their writing, this was the case with only 24% of mainstream course assignments.

Mainstream course assignments also provided more choice to students in deciding the topic or text on which they would write. More than half of assignments (53%) were open-ended, while the rest either provided a list of options (18%) or did not allow students to choose (29%). Unlike ESL assignments, all of these assignments were completed outside of class, and the length of these assignments ranged considerably. Similar to ESL course assignments, almost half of mainstream course assignments (47%) were expected to be between two and three pages, but a number of mainstream assignments were substantially longer, including between four and five pages (35%) and 11 and 15 pages (18%). Among the most frequently encountered topics addressed in these assignments were media and culture (35%) and writing about writing (29%). This focus on writing about writing, in particular, was consistent with the second category of course objectives described earlier, which adopted a more dynamic view of writing.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate similarities and differences between ESL and mainstream composition courses. Specifically, we focused on two aspects of courses in each setting: course objectives and course assignments. In this section, we discuss each aspect in turn, situating our findings within the relevant literature.

Course Objectives

ESL and mainstream courses shared similar objectives but differed in the aspects of writing they foregrounded. ESL courses were generally aimed at preparing students for college-level writing, emphasizing the integration of source text, the writing process, and a range of global and local writing concerns. Hyland (2003) observed that L2 writing instructors often adopt a range of different foci in their courses, including a focus on language structures, text patterns, the writing process, and genre. All of these foci were represented in ESL course syllabi. Broadly, the orientation adopted in ESL courses seems to align with what Fulkerson (2005) refers to as "procedural rhetoric," a constellation of approaches that emphasizes "writing effectively for different audiences, seeing writing as an extended process of multiple tasks and drafts, and learning to control surface features and formatting" (p. 670).

In contrast, some mainstream courses tended to adopt a more dynamic view of writing by placing less emphasis on the prototypical rhetorical features of college-level writing (e.g., exposition with an introduction, body, and conclusion) and greater emphasis on adapting writing to fit different contexts. This emphasis is consistent with more socially oriented approaches to writing instruction, which move away from "neat formulae or structures for guiding learning of new writing skills" (Beaufort, 2000, p. 217)

in favor of instruction that prepares students to write for authentic social purposes in the school context and beyond.

Still other mainstream courses shifted attention away from writing itself and onto the content of writing. This emphasis on content could present both opportunities and challenges for L2 writers enrolled in these courses. On the one hand, an emphasis on content responds to what has been a perennial critique of L2 writing instruction, and instruction with L2 learners in general, as focusing too narrowly on linguistic concerns. Valdés (2004), for example, has argued: "What is missing entirely from discussions of the teaching of academic discourse to L2 learners . . . is the notion that writing is about ideas" (p. 122). On the other hand, by prioritizing *what* students write (i.e., ideas) over *how* they write (i.e., language), these courses may fall short of providing appropriate linguistic supports. In their recent survey of L2 writers in first-year composition courses, Ferris, Eckstein, and DeHond (2017) found that these students "overwhelmingly wanted and expected language instruction" (p. 418). Furthermore, Hyland (2003) cautions that content-oriented courses may prove disadvantageous to L2 writers, who "do not typically have a strong familiarity with either the topics or types of texts they will have to write" (p. 15). This is consistent with mainstream courses in our sample, which focused primarily on social and environmental issues germane to the U.S. context.

Interestingly, the content of mainstream courses, in comparison with the themes typical of ESL courses, was less likely to focus on issues of diversity, multiculturalism, and social justice. While these issues may have particular significance for L2 writers, addressing these issues in composition courses can raise *all students'* awareness of injustices and asymmetrical power relations in contemporary society (Fulkerson, 2005). Given the emphasis in mainstream courses on critical thinking and exploring complex ideas, these courses could be a productive site for broaching such important and timely issues.

Course Assignments

Our analysis revealed both similarities and differences in the types of assignments found in ESL and mainstream courses. Though several studies have analyzed assignments from undergraduate and graduate academic content courses (Hale et al., 1996; Horowitz, 1986; Moore & Morton, 2005), only a few have focused their analysis on composition courses (e.g., Leki & Carson, 1994, 1997). In ESL and mainstream courses alike, the rhetorical mode of exposition was most frequently encountered. This finding is consistent with Schleppegrell's (2004) observation that "most first year writing courses focus on developing students' expository writing" (p. 88).

Both ESL and mainstream assignments also required the use of source text; however, there were important differences in how texts were used in each setting. Almost half of ESL assignments involved analysis of the texts themselves. Hyland (2003) noted that the analysis of "expert" texts is common practice in L2 writing courses, as it helps students develop a metalanguage for describing text features and other "socially recognized ways of using language" (p. 18). Mainstream assignments, on the other hand, viewed texts primarily as sources of evidence and examples. Fulkerson (2005) observed that, while composition courses of different types require close reading of texts, their ways of using those texts vary widely based on the particular approach adopted in the course. Some courses, similar to mainstream courses in our sample, expect students to "read critically and cite the texts read in their own papers on related topics," while other courses, similar to ESL courses in our sample, use texts "as discourse models from which students can generalize" (p. 675). These differences, Fulkerson notes, are not trivial or superficial but deeply rooted in axiological, epistemological, and pedagogical beliefs about the nature of writing and learning to write.

Leki and Carson (1997) also investigated the use of source text in ESL composition courses and found that writing based on personal experience was prevalent but that writing without any source text was relatively rare. This is consistent with the ESL assignments in our sample (though not the mainstream

assignments), which encouraged students to incorporate personal examples in their writing but, in nearly all cases, also involved source text. Thus, personal examples were meant to complement, rather than replace, the use of source text. Leki and Carson's critique of ESL assignments, however, was that they failed to prepare students for the writing demands of academic content courses, because they used texts as a point of departure for writing but did not hold students accountable for understanding the content of those texts. This was not the case with the assignments in our sample, as students in both course types were expected to demonstrate comprehension of what they read, whether by evaluating, responding to, or drawing on text in their writing.

Furthermore, ESL assignments, in comparison with mainstream assignments, required less independent research and offered less choice. They were also shorter in length and more likely to be completed in class than mainstream assignments.

Implications for College Writing Programs and L2 Writing Instruction and Research

Overall, we found that ESL and mainstream courses shared some similarities but also differed in several significant ways. These findings have implications for college writing programs with L2 writers, L2 writing instruction, and L2 writing research.

A clear implication of this study is that college writing programs must be aware of fundamental differences in the demands of various course types. Awareness of these differences can assist in placing L2 writers in first-year composition, especially in institutions that offer both ESL and mainstream courses. Moreover, college writing programs can capitalize on differences between these courses by harnessing the diverse expertise of the instructors who teach them. We echo Ferris, Brown, Liu, and Stine (2011) in encouraging ESL instructors to "think creatively about ways to share their knowledge and expertise with mainstream composition colleagues" (p. 226), and we further emphasize that such collaboration can be mutually beneficial. Ongoing dialogue between ESL instructors, with disciplinary training in second language studies, and mainstream instructors, with disciplinary training in composition studies, can help break down the "disciplinary division of labor" (Matsuda, 1999, p. 669) that has long persisted in college composition with L2 writers.

These findings also have implications for L2 writing instruction more broadly. Awareness of the multiple ways in which writing courses differ can help writing instructors think through aspects of course design with the particular needs of L2 writers in mind. Through this process, writing instructors can become more intentional about aspects of their course design that they may not have previously considered, including the relative emphasis on writing versus the content of writing in their course objectives or the different ways that source text is used in their course assignments. Given the descriptive nature of our study, it would be unwarranted to speculate which aspects of course design are "better" for L2 writers; however, these aspects may be productively considered in terms of potential trade-offs. For example, by focusing on the content of writing, writing courses can create a space for L2 writers to explore complex ideas; however, this emphasis on content may come at the expense of providing much-needed linguistic supports (Ferris, Eckstein, & DeHond, 2017). By focusing on a range of local and global writing concerns, writing courses can address the rhetorical and linguistic needs of L2 writers; however, this focus on language may be more susceptible to de-emphasizing the content of writing, thereby reducing it to "the raw material on which the students are to practice" (Jolliffe, 1995, p. 200). By considering such trade-offs, writing instructors across all educational levels can adopt a more principled approach to designing instructional environments that meet their L2 writers' particular needs.

More concretely, the findings of this study may provide the impetus for writing instructors to (re)consider their course objectives and assignments in a new light. Specifically, instructors may consider

whether their objectives align with one or more of the approaches described earlier. Instructors may also look for patterns in their course assignments based on the categories identified in the classification scheme (see Table 1 and Appendix A). In considering each aspect of their course design, instructors can ask: "What are the potential consequences for all students and L2 writers in particular?" This exercise could be done in collaboration with fellow writing instructors as well as other stakeholders affected by these courses, including administrators, instructors of disciplinary courses, and the students themselves.

With regard to research, an important methodological contribution of this study is a classification scheme for writing course assignments that differs from previous schemes in its degree of specificity. While previous schemes were developed to classify writing tasks from a range of disciplines and contexts, the classification scheme for this study was developed to identify differences across writing tasks assigned in composition courses in particular. For example, whereas previous classification schemes have considered the use of source text (e.g., Purves et al., 1984), our scheme distinguishes between different ways that students are expected to use source texts as well as the origin of those texts (e.g., provided in assignment versus independently researched). This scheme can enable researchers to provide a more nuanced account of writing tasks that, on the surface, appear similar but in fact differ in significant ways.

Having established, in broad strokes, that ESL and mainstream courses differ, further research should carry out more fine-grained analyses comparing different types of writing courses in the multiple and particular contexts in which they are offered. One fruitful direction could answer Leki's (2000) call for "hearing students' voices" (p. 17) in L2 writing research by investigating students' experiences in different course types. Institutional case studies, similar to Matsuda et al. (2013), could also offer insights into how writing programs coordinate different course types to provide equitable and coherent learning experiences for L2 writers. Continued inquiry in these areas will be essential for ensuring L2 writers are prepared to meet the academic demands of their university settings and beyond.

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Appendix A: Classification Scheme for Writing Course Assignments

CATEGORY	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Rhetorical mode		
Exposition	Students develop a thesis and support it with evidence/examples.	Write an expository essay about the factors that shape our identities and influence the choices we make. A successful essay will be organized in standard essay format with a clear introduction and thesis supported by focused body paragraphs with detailed examples.
Argument	Students take a stance on an issue with clearly defined sides.	How important do you think it is for immigrants to become, as Frey says, "fully integrated" in one's new community? Take a stand for or against his statement.
Narration with interpretation	Students write about sequentially related events as well as interpret the meaning or importance of those events.	In this essay, you will relate an experience or event that illuminates the role of literacy in your life.
Non-traditional	No recognizable rhetorical mode	The fourth essay of the school year asks you to reckon with an art object within the context of a particular public setting—both physical and conceptual.
Use of source text		
Writing about or in response to text	Students (a) write about a text or (b) respond to an author's ideas.	(a) Take one of Ford's chapters and analyze how it develops a specific theme through character, setting, plot, figurative language, and/or point of view. (b) Summarize the main ideas of Easterbrook's article and then respond to his ideas with your own original thesis.
Drawing on evidence/examples from text	Students draw on evidence/ examples from text to shed light on an issue or experience.	Clearly state what you believe the purpose of education is and how those purposes might be achieved. Use at least one of the readings assigned in class or an article that you found online to strengthen your argument.
Unspecified	Not specified whether source text is required	You will write a well-argued essay in letter form, a response to a public or philosophical issue that deeply concerns you.
Use of personal examples		
Yes	Students are encouraged/allowed to use personal examples in their writing.	You must support your viewpoint with specific examples and explanations from the articles by Russell Baker and Gloria Steinem. You may also use your own experience if you wish.
No	Students are not encouraged/ allowed to use personal examples in their writing.	Compare what Daniel Schwartz would say about this ballot process to what Abbie Hoffman would say.
Choice of topic/text		
Options provided	Students choose the topic/text of writing from a list of options.	You will choose a writing topic provided by the teacher: (a) Are the web filters at your school too restrictive, (b) Does technology make us more alone, (c) etc.
Open-ended	Students choose the topic/text on which they write.	Your task in this assignment is to write an editorial on any topic related to inequality and poverty you choose.
No choice	Students do not choose the topic/text on which they write.	In this paper, you will summarize and review *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie.